



2024

JUSTICE

Vol.39 **ACTUALITÉS - REPORT** No.3

CANADIAN CRIMINAL JUSTICE ASSOCIATION - ASSOCIATION CANADIENNE DE JUSTICE PÉNALE

SPECIAL ISSUE ON 7TH STEP PEER SUPPORT
GUEST EDITOR NANCY EVERSON-BERRIGAN

LIVED EXPERIENCE - EXPÉRIENCE VÉCUE



NANCY EVERSON-BERRIGAN
GUEST EDITOR // RÉDACTRICE INVITÉE
**7th Step Society of
Nova Scotia**



Banff 2024

PURSuing RECONCILIATION IN THE CANADIAN CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM
39TH CCJA CONGRESS

The JUSTICE REPORT contains information of value to Association readers and the public interested in matters related to the administration of justice in Canada. Opinions expressed in this publication do not necessarily reflect the Association's views, but are included to encourage reflection and action on the criminal justice system throughout Canada.

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ISSN 2563-3449 (Print) ISSN 2563-3457 (Online)

CREDIT: Images provided by 7th Step Nova Scotia / Canada / or the authors.

LAYOUT BY MARTIN SPIELAUER

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EDITORIAL

NANCY EVERSON-BERRIGAN

Guest Editor

When I was asked to create this Special Issue (SI) on 7th Step Peer Support, I was flattered at first and then scared. What if I'm not good enough? What if I fail? Maybe I should, let someone else, do it?

For some of us who have been incarcerated, negative self-talk is common. Doubts and insecurities hinder positive growth. Having a criminal record can be a 'life sentence'. Then you go to your first 7th Step meeting. It's nice to realize you are not alone and don't feel judged. There are possibilities and encouragement. As my lead article—Face of the "Offender"—shows, I am the expert of my story – as others are of theirs.

The 7th Step Peer Support model brings individuals who have had conflict with the law together with volunteers to share their heart-felt stories. With 20 contributors, this SI presents the power of Peer Support and importance of lived experience from the perspective of some of 7th Step Society's inspiring women.

These articles are filled with the hope and determination of women passionate about helping others. Peer Support involvement is one of the keys to sustainable change, as Erin, a criminology student, points out: "Those who have lived through the carceral systems are uniquely poised to help guide policy." Programming facilitated by lived experience is the most impactful.

The 7 Steps to Freedom – examples of connections made in the articles

Step 1 – Erin M declares, "School is important, but hearing from real people is imperative for learning about what people need."

Step 2 – "Because I have fallen down, I know how to climb up, and while I'm climbing, I will reach out my hand & help you climb too." Susan H. shares the sentiment.

Step 3 – "People change People," says Nicole L. "It's amazing to see the growth & journey that some of the members have gone through."

Step 4 – Sophia T. explains what the 4th Step made her realize, "The most important thing I've learned since joining 7th Step is that having someone care about you makes a difference." "I am able to calmly but forcefully stand up for myself."

Step 5 – It took time and education for Darlene L. to say, "I need help" and to let go of the resentments, and the *Code of silence*."

Step 6 – "A good PS [Peer Support] person is ready to share their own experiences to help another person get to their next success and to keep their freedom." Tammy M. voices support of daily progress.

Step 7 –As Gwen G. concludes, "However, as much as I hope that I have helped others in this way, I know I have learned far more from the members than I have ever given them".

There is no "Us" and "Them" when we walk into the rooms of the 7th Step Society. Everyone is on the same level!

Note: See the Coming Events at the end of this SI for a list of prisons served (past/present) and 7th Step chapters in Canada.



Lorsqu'on m'a demandé de créer ce numéro spécial (NS) portant sur le concept de soutien par les pairs de la 7th Step Society of Canada, j'ai d'abord été flattée, puis effrayée. Et si je ne suis pas assez bonne ? Et si j'échoue ? Peut-être que je devrais, laisser quelqu'un d'autre, le faire ?

Certains d'entre nous qui ont été incarcérés ont souvent des discours internes négatifs. Les doutes et l'insécurité entravent la croissance positive. Avoir un casier peut ressembler à une condamnation à la perpétuité. Ensuite, tu participe à ta première réunion 7th Step. S'asseoir et ne pas être jugé est vraiment agréable. Il y a des possibilités et du soutien. Comme mon article dans ce NS montre, je suis l'experte de mon histoire, comme d'autres le sont de leurs.

Des bénévoles et des gens ayant eu des démêlés avec la justice se réunissent avec 7th Step afin de partager du cœur leurs histoires. Avec 20 contributeurs, ce numéro spécial de l'*Actualités Justice* présente le pouvoir du soutien par les pairs et l'importance de leurs propres expériences sous l'angle de certaines des femmes inspirantes de la 7th Step Society.

Ces articles sont marqués par leur espoir et leur détermination passionnée d'aider les autres. Comme le souligne Erin, une étudiante en criminologie, le soutien par les pairs est un élément essentiel du changement durable : « Ceux qui ont vécu les systèmes carcéraux sont particulièrement bien placés pour aider à orienter les politiques pénales. »

La programmation qui est facilitée par l'expérience vécue est la plus puissante.

Les 7 étapes vers la liberté et un aperçu de quelques-uns des articles.

1 – Selon Erin, l'école est essentielle, mais il est crucial d'écouter à des individus authentiques pour comprendre ce dont ils ont besoin

2 – Étant tombé, je sais comment grimper. En grimpant, je vais tendre ma main pour vous aider à grimper aussi." Susan H. partage le sentiment de l'étape 2.

3 – "Les individus influent sur les individus (People change people)," dit Nicole L., la croissance et le chemin parcouru par certains membres sont vraiment impressionnants.

4 – Sophia T. explique l'étape 4th en notant que le 7th Step lui a appris que le fait que quelqu'un se soucie de vous a une influence significative.

5 – Darlene L. avait besoin de temps et d'éducation pour reconnaître son besoin d'aide, et de lâcher ses ressentiments ainsi que le 'Code de silence'."

6 – Un bon soutien pair est prêt à partager ses propres expériences pour aider une autre personne à atteindre son prochain succès et à garder sa liberté. Tammy M. soutient les progrès quotidiens.

7 – Comme le conclut Gwen G., même si j'espère avoir aidé les autres de cette façon, j'ai appris beaucoup plus des membres que je ne leur ai jamais donné."

Il n'y a pas de « nous » et de « eux » lorsque nous entrons dans les salles de la 7e Société. Tout le monde est au même niveau !

Note: Voir la fin de ce volume pour une liste des prisons servies (passées/présentes) et des chapitres de la 7th Step au Canada.

Face of the "Offender"¹

NANCY EVERSON-BERRIGAN

Peer Support/Program Coordinator (7th Step Nova Scotia)
Program/Volunteer Coordinator (7th Step Canada or National)
Administration - Pardon Me 7th Step (7th Step Canada)

Framed within a context of Guest Editor Nancy Everson-Berrigan's own journey through trauma and recovery, this Special Issue on 7th Step Peer Support brings together insightful contributions by a variety of justice stakeholders—such as 7th Step Peer Support workers and "non offender" volunteers including a criminal lawyer, crown attorney, students, current 7th Step clients, a Correctional Officer, a professor at Saint Mary's University, among others—to offer a holistic understanding of how unresolved trauma in the criminal justice sphere is undermining public safety. The 7th Step Society of Canada, since 1967, and its provincial chapters are here to help!

As even a quick Internet search shows, "lived experience", "trauma", "stigma", and "peer support" are becoming call words in the criminal justice sphere and associated fields by the media, academia, government, and also in policing/ other (frontline) emergency servicesⁱ, the courts, drug rehabilitation, homelessness, and more. We are proud that 7th Step, since 1967, was the first in Canada to formally research and apply these concepts to criminal rehabilitation and recovery; and we haven't stopped a minute since. Embracing lived experience and a belief that positive change is possible with appropriate help, 7th Step's Peer Support concept is surging across the justice continuum as a winning philosophy.

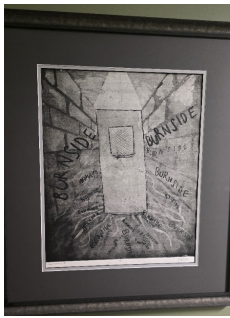
Given the complexity of the issues at hand, this Special Issue of the *Justice Report* aims to offer a modest overview of 7th Step Peer Support. My contributors include "non offender"/non formerly incarcerated legal professionals or students volunteering with 7th Step, a correctional officer delivering 7th Step's Taking Responsibility program

inside New Brunswick Women's Correctional Centre and statements by four participants, 7th Step case managers, and peer support workers who—like myself—have overcome and emerged from the trauma-addiction-prison pipeline to use their lived experience to help others.

Like unresolved trauma, stigma related to criminal records is a prevalent factor in recidivismⁱⁱ. The awarding of a pardon (aka record suspension) ensures legal protection from discrimination preventing "ex-offenders" from gaining meaningful employment, access to certain professions and housing, among other things.

I hope that—together—this small collection of articles will give you a broad but holistic understanding of the rehabilitation needs of the convicted and what is at stake in terms of public safety. In this lead article, I use my own lived experience to put the range of information presented by the various authors into context.

1: The use of quotation marks around certain terms, such as "offender", in this SI is to call attention to criminal labelling, a topic mentioned in relation to recidivism by several of my contributing authors. Labeling is dehumanizing and impacts self-identity, also affecting how one is treated by others by pushing unrealistic public fears. Terms like "offender" create negative stereotypes carrying misleading connotations that lead to public stigma. Although many now replace "offender" with a term like "incarcerated person", "offender" remains entrenched as a legal term in the Canadian Criminal Code.



"Burnside" iii
CREDIT: The artist:
©Charles Patterson

If you had asked me 7 years ago where I would be today, it definitely would not be working with individuals who have had conflict with the law or who are incarcerated. I was ashamed and full of fear as I faced the Judge. The courtroom was so quiet and deafening at the same time. The room was spinning and I couldn't hear the Judge sentence me to two years in

Federal Prison for trafficking a Schedule 1 drug. They escorted me to the cold holding cell where I spent the next few hours waiting for transfer to Central Nova Scotia Correctional Facility, also known as Burnside. In shock, I wondered how the hell I got there. I thought about every choice I had made over the last couple years, actually every decision in my life. What brought me to this moment?

According to Department of Justice Canada (2021), individuals "suffering from mental illness and addiction are overrepresented in the Criminal Justice System" and also often "face other issues... such as poverty, or previous trauma" (DoJ, 2021^{iv}). This also means that such social ill prevails in communities and in child protection, and is feeding Canada's jails and prisons. The experiences that bring about personal change can be negative or positive, and they take root. For example, in this Special Issue of the *Justice Report*, Darlene Gilbert's article "Thunderbird Woman Swooping Down" presents her lived experience to illustrate the link between childhood trauma, associated social isolation/exclusion, and criminal justice.

Raped and failed by the justice system at age 8 when her aggressor—who lived in her neighbourhood—received 18 months' probation and an order to stay 500 feet away, Gilbert also developed trauma while in child protection from ages 10-19, becoming a 'runner' and having run-ins with the law. Gilbert highlights the benefit of specialized courts and other alternative legal processes such as Gladue to keep Indigenous people out of prison, integral carceral supports such as Elizabeth Fry, and effective long-term follow-up including 7th Step. Today, Gilbert is involved in finding healing solutions for the 60s Scoop Generation. See the 7th Step Pledge in Mi'kmaq, English and French on page 54 of this SI.

I [Nancy Everson-Berrigan] am not Indigenous. My childhood trauma includes abandonment by my mother, abuse from my stepmother, and witnessing my father attempt suicide. My mother left when I was 18 months old. My father tried to raise me with his second wife, but she was abusive. I have few memories from that time in my life. The memories I do have are not happy. I vaguely remember my stepmother coming to pick me up at my Nan's house when I was 4, and I didn't want to leave with her – she kicked me down the hallway of my Nan's trailer. Shortly after that incident, Nan and Gramp (my father's parents) saved me by bringing me to live with them.

My father was an addict, and he moved in across the road with his new wife and kids. His wife frequently kicked him out for drinking too much, and he'd come stay with us. I don't remember much about the night I witnessed my father shoot himself, but he didn't die. My Nan asked me to put Dad's bloody shirt in the woodstove. This was a big deal because I was never allowed around the stove – I was 4 years old. I remember feeling very proud of myself for doing exactly as I was told. It made my Nan happy. Little did I know, these incidents and my feelings of accomplishment would create a need to people please, disassociate from my feelings, and constantly look for external validation of my worth.

My Nan tried so hard to make every minute of my life happy. I believe she was trying to make up for the first 5 years of my life. I didn't want to disappoint her, so I always had a smile on my face. I felt guilty when I was angry, or sad so I stuffed those emotions down deep.

I was an honour student but dropped out of school in grade 11 to have a baby and get married. My husband became abusive, and I didn't know what to do. I had three daughters by age 19 and divorced him at 21. He became more abusive. It was a scary time in my life. After many incidents of abuse, he was finally arrested and charged. His sentence was a joke, but it stopped him from coming around.

The "majority of federal inmates have at least one mental health diagnosis [70% of men and 79% of women]"^v. Although Canada's incarceration rate is very low compared to most countries, the social/community impact of each inmate who leaves prison with unresolved issues is exponential, affecting not only family members but also public safety. Keep in

mind, 70 inmates overdosed in 2017 inside Canadian prisons. "174 non-fatal overdose incidents in federal custody were reported in 2019/2020, a 58% increase from 2018/2019", with 43% occurring in Ontario" and 85% deemed "accidental" (i.e., no evidence of intentionality) (CSC, 2023). At odds with CSC's core mandate to rehabilitate and safely reintegrate people released from prison into the community, these circumstances help explain the high recidivism rates.

Offering her perspective as a criminal lawyer and dedicated 7th Step volunteer, Maude Malson's contribution to this SI identifies another major factor in recidivism—social isolation—yet changing one's life circumstances alone and building a lasting support network in prison is not easy. Malson applauds the 7th Step program for creating a 'client-centered' space where people are given the support they need to connect with positive peers. Tammy MacDermaid advocates for 7th Step's Taking Responsibility Program that she, as a Correctional Officer, delivers at New Brunswick Women's Correctional Centre (NBWCC). Tammy and Maude facilitate the group, which started in January 2023, while I provide Peer Support via Zoom. Jaime Wiebe, who teaches the GED program at NBWCC, replaced Maude during her pregnancy leave. We have completed 4 rounds of training so far.

The article by Alexandra Dodge, who is an Assistant Professor of Criminology at St. Mary's University, NS, offers a "Volunteer and Academic Perspective on 7th Step Peer Support". She describes 7th Step's approach of 'micro-community' building for participants and support of systems change through outreach to schools, criminal-legal stakeholders, and policy makers. In "Happy Endings", Darlene M. Lund—a practicing Social Worker (MSW) helped long ago by a 7th Step self-help group—reminds us that "the longer you carry something the heavier it gets"; and that asking for help is the first, but-not-easy, step.

When I was 23, I remarried and completed an Administrative Assistant Diploma. We had a son when I turned twenty-six. Life was good, but I always felt something was missing from my life. Why couldn't I just be happy?

After fourteen years of marriage, I left my husband. I had an affair with a co-worker from Michelin. I spent the next five years with him. I was drinking every day. I left him when he cheated on me with a co-worker.

My whole life was turned upside down. I declared bankruptcy and found a place to live. I felt it was Karma, but it was negative change brought on by my past trauma. I was single for about a month before I started dating a "Cook" in 2012. Our relationship was centered around drinking. He also introduced me to cocaine. I got injured in 2014, and was prescribed a "cocktail" of drugs, Percocet, Gabapentin, and Flexeril. The doctors didn't know I was drinking, and this quickly became a deadly combination.

The morning after his birthday party in Jan 2015, I woke up in a lot of pain and disorientated. The "Cook" was asleep beside me. Our bedroom looked like a tornado had gone through. There was blood everywhere, like a murder scene from a movie, and I was covered in it. I only had memory flashes from the night before, but there were bloody handprints all over the walls and red snow on the kitchen floor where a window was broken. I had a black eye, swollen lip, and my head was still bleeding. We figured the cocaine we consumed was laced and decided to pretend it never happened. I'm very lucky to be alive. I had a lot of blackouts during this time.

Several of the articles in this Special issue on 7th Step Peer Support argue that an understanding of the gaps in mental health supports and in child protection, all of which risks overloading police services, is important for all criminal justice stakeholders including lawyers, criminologists, and policy makers. Sophia Trinacty—a lawyer and on 7th Step Nova Scotia's board, which includes "ex-offenders" and "non offender" volunteers—initially volunteered with 7th Step as a law student to gain an understanding of the criminal justice system's impact on people. Trinacty reports how volunteering with 7th Step opened her eyes to the practical barriers facing people leaving prison. Erin Miller, in "Lived Experience: Bridging the Gap Between Academia and Policy", points out she gained more understanding from a chance speaker at her university and subsequent involvement as a "non offender" volunteer with 7th Step in these respects than from the coursework in her four-year criminology program.

In June of 2015, at the age of 43, I [Nancy Everson-Berrigan] thought I was menopausal but was pregnant. I immediately stopped drinking, smoking and using drugs but 4 weeks later had a miscarriage. That messed with my head, and my coping skill was to use. 2 months later I was pregnant again. At the first

ultrasound, we discovered there was no heartbeat. After the surgery to remove the fetus, a nurse said, "you must feel so much better now?" I wanted to rip her head off but instead smiled politely and said, "Yes I do, thank you". I left that hospital wearing my happy mask but, on the inside, I felt lost and alone.

In January 2016, after my suicide attempt, I went back to work – telling everyone I had been in ICU for an allergic reaction to medication. I stood on my platform, ready to start building a tire and just couldn't. I was so tired of pretending I was okay. I told my boss the truth, explained what happened to the medical centre, and asked for help. Michelin paid for a private drug treatment facility that I went to 3 days later. When I left rehab in February 2016, I thought I was "just" an alcoholic and did not fully understand the disease of addiction.

After completing 28 days of rehab, I started going to a 12-step program and met a woman who was only pretending to be in recovery. It wasn't long before I relapsed, and started "running drugs" (i.e., transporting) for her while she kept me high every day. I quit my job and put myself in dangerous situations because I craved the intense euphoric high that crack gave me. My daughter told me I was no longer welcome in her home or around my grandchildren. I am ashamed to say I was relieved that I didn't have to be around family anymore. No more 20-minute visits pretending I wanted to be there. My drug of "no choice" took away my ability to care about anything – even the good things in my life.

My "friend" got busted one night. I was at her place, so they searched my van but didn't find anything. The undercover drug enforcement agent (DEA) said to me, "Nancy you need to get away from these people, you are a grandmother for God's sake, what about your family?" I was angry with him because I was one of "these people".

Soon I was selling crack cocaine and had a 25-year-old running for me. He became my boyfriend. I was using more than what I was selling and getting further into debt. One night, I "fronted" (i.e., on consignment) about 14 grams of crack and called him over to party. We used until a knock at my door brought a SWAT team looking for him. Officers went to the bedroom to arrest him, but I pushed my way in – to get my rock of crack – and was soon face down on my bed in handcuffs and charged with Possession and Trafficking a Schedule 1 Drug. The next memory



Active addiction.

I have was being interrogated at the police station. I told them nothing. An ambulance was called because I was withdrawing. I spent 5 hours in the hospital, let go with a Lorazepam prescription, and ordered to have no contact with my boyfriend, my co-accused.

I had nowhere to stay, but an acquaintance offered me a room to rent. A friend of hers became my dealer. The next few months were the worst. I was maybe a hundred pounds. I thought I looked good. I was slowly killing myself and had isolated myself from everyone, including my using friends. Even the awful pains in my stomach when I used didn't stop me. In January of 2017, I went to the hospital's detox and 28-day program. I haven't used since that time! From there, I took myself to a 12-step program (again) and started working on my life in recovery. I had a lot of amends to make and relationships to fix but I focused on one day at a time.

I forgot all about my charges but a year later received notice of a court date. My Legal Aid lawyer advised me to plead guilty so I could get into drug court. My co-accused was acquitted. Someone had "to pay" and I had plead guilty, so it was all on me. The prosecutor vetoed my application to drug court, and I was going to jail. I left her office shaking. I sat outside and made a phone call – not to my dealer but a friend in the 12-step program, and the second call was to my kids. How could this be happening?! At my sentencing, in July 2017, the judge asked if drug court was an option and said it was a shame when the Crown said "no". At the time there was a mandatory, minimum sentence for trafficking a Schedule 1 drug – 2 years in federal prison! I was in shock. The judge gave me a couple

months to get my affairs in order.

COVID-19 made us all remember that "the courts are a pillar of Canada's democracy" because they represent "an essential service to Canadians, and a critical support to family, social and economic activity" (OCFJA, 2021). As Senior Crown Attorney at Dartmouth Wellness Court (DWC), Aileen McGinty, notes in her contribution, "COVID and Peer Support", to this Special Issue on 7th Step, the need for peer support became more apparent than ever when the court processes went virtual during the pandemic. She recalls unfruitful efforts to establish a plan for formal peer support within DWC prior to COVID and that an informal peer process showing some success fell away when the courts went viral. According to McGinty, DWC today is more invested than ever in determining how to integrate a formal approach to peer support.

The article by Sara Tessier of Northpine Foundation helps us understand the vital role of peer support, how shared lived experience fosters an immediate connection and rapport with those seeking help, and that peer support workers have a unique ability to identify needs/problems and bridge the persistent barriers to appropriate care. As the celebrated addiction specialist Dr. Gabor Maté puts it, "When we understand that people who are addicted are traumatized people, now we have to take an approach that will help them heal that trauma, rather than make it worse by locking them up". Maté "believes that the source of addictions is not to be found in genes, but in childhood trauma and in stress and social dislocation endemic to systems of inequality and injustice".

I [Nancy Everson-Berrigan] was put in a metal cage in the back of a Sheriff's van and taken to a provincial jail for transfer to a federal prison. Upon arrival I was strip searched for the first time; it was humiliating and degrading. My cell had a metal slab for a bed, no pillow, a small, built-in metal desk, and a steel toilet. No privacy. The next eight days were traumatizing, but I promised myself I wouldn't give up. I was also strip searched upon arrival at Nova, but in a more respectful way and my room was in a house and had a lock on the inside, which gave me a sense of security.



Labels create the face of the "offender".
Nancy Everson-Berrigan, 2024

Since my release in 2018, my story has come full circle. The 12 steps keep me clean, but 7th Step has taught me how to live clean. I stayed with my Nan until ready for an apartment. I didn't look like the stereotypical 'ex-con/crack addict' or have the "face of an offender"; one landlord said I looked responsible and should beware of the

'criminals' down the road because they probably did drugs and the cops were often there. There was no criminal record check for the apartment, making my reintegration much easier.

7th Step's unique approach to peer support embodies the adage "people change people", which is the topic broached herein by JD Candidate Nicole Luis—a volunteer with 7th Step whose experience includes exposure to mental illness, addiction, and conflict with the law. Lamenting the impact of stigma (see also Dodge and Luis, for example) and the fact that Canadian law has no provisions for automatic pardons (sequestering), Cindy Brian highlights the dire need for solutions to recidivism. This Special Issue (SI) also offers a brief history of 7th Step Peer Support and programs.

When incarcerated at Nova, I had to make it clear to everyone—including inmates and healthcare—that I was in recovery and planned on staying that way. The violence and self-harm inside the prison walls is something I will not forget. There were no 12-step meetings, but the Warden accepted my request for a weekly Narcotics Anonymous (NA) meeting. Programming is mandatory at Nova, and I did learn a few things. A Peer support facilitator would have made the content more impactful. While cleaning a bathroom at Nova I reached into a Kleenex box and was stabbed by a home-made tattoo gun. I had to take the HIV protocol (PEP) everyday for 28 days and then be tested for HIV/HEP C. I tested negative.



My dog Junie freely provides emotional support at the Pardon Me 7th Step office.
CREDIT: Nancy Everson-Berrigan

Contributor Gwen Gleason-Graham is a clinical therapist who half a century ago became a "non offender" volunteer as a student. Her article discusses 50 Vibrant Years with 7th Step Society gaining valuable insight from the lived experience of others. This Special Issue on 7th Step Peer Support also includes a statement by the senior advisor for the Pan-Canadian Joint Consortium for School

Health (JCSH), Susan Hornby, who honours 7th Step peer support; a verse contextualizing the 7 Steps to Freedom by El Jones (PhD), a journalist, activist, associate professor (Mount Saint Vincent University – Halifax) and former Poet Laureate; and four handwritten statements by current participants in the program at New Brunswick Women's Correctional Centre in Miramichi, NB. See the 7 Steps to Freedom on page 25.

In January of 2020, I suffered a workplace injury and now live with chronic pain. I became a PSW for 7th Step NS in 2021. I returned to school, at age 50, and received my diploma in Counselling and Social Human Services. I married Joey, a recovering addict, in September 2023. This year, 2024, I accepted a position as National 7th Step Program/Volunteer Coordinator. My passion is helping others, so they know they aren't alone. I pray my story instills hope. My dog Junie freely provides emotional support at the Pardon Me 7th Step office.

7th Step believed in me when I didn't believe in myself. They could see the potential in me and helped me build my confidence and self-worth. I will be forever grateful to the 7th Step Society of Nova Scotia for showing me the how-tos of living (and thriving) in recovery and sharing my lived experience to help others. This is why I agreed to be Guest Editor of this Special Issue of the Justice Report. My thanks go out to 7th Step Society of Canada for over 50 years of promoting the value of lived experience and peer support in criminological research, the CCJA for this

opportunity, my husband and family for always supporting me, and all my contributors for making this SI possible.

NOTES

i) For up-to-date information and resources on peer support models/systems being researched and designed for and by Public Service Personnel in Canada, see Justice Report #38.2 with Guest Editor Dr. Robert (Bob) Christmas. Freely available at <https://www.ccja-acjp.ca/pub/en/justice-report/>

ii) As part of its Federal Framework to Reduce Recidivism Implementation Plan, Public Safety Canada (2023) recently reduced the fees for a record suspension from \$657.77 to \$50.00.

iii) Painting: © Charles Patterson. Reprinted with permission - submitted on the artist's behalf by Nancy Everson-Berrigan. Charles Patterson, an artist and art student at Potsdam State University of New York conducted interviews with formerly incarcerated individuals about poor treatment by the system. Patterson's project includes creating a series of artworks about their experiences using intaglio printmaking techniques.

iv) DoJ. (2021). Transforming the Criminal Justice System: Mental Health and Addictions. Department of Justice Canada. <https://www.justice.gc.ca/eng/news-nouv/photo/video9.html>

v) "As in other jurisdictions, the prevalence of mental disorders in federal Canadian prisons remains significantly higher than in the community, about 2–4 times higher for psychosis and major depression, and 10 times higher for antisocial personality disorder" [Fazel & Danesh. 2002. Serious mental disorder in 23 000 prisoners: a systematic review of 62 surveys. *Lancet* 359: 545-50. PubMed], 11 with 70% of men and 79% of women having at least one DSM-IV-TR diagnosis [Beaudette et al. 2015; Brown et al., 2018 in Cameron et al., *BJPsych*, 2021]". Cameron, C. Khalifa, N, Bickle, A, Safdar, H, Hassan, T. *Psychiatry in the federal correctional system in Canada. BJPsych International* 18(2): 42-46. doi.org/10.1192/bji.2020.56. See also, Public Safety Canada. Structured Intervention Units and the Implementation Advisory Panel. <https://www.publicsafety.gc.ca/cnt/cntrng-crm/crrctns/suiap-ccuis-en.aspx>

vi) Regina Leader Post / Robinson, A. "Trauma is the root cause of addiction, according to Dr. Gabor Maté"; Gabor Maté. In the realm of hungry ghosts. <https://drgabormate.com/addiction/>

RÉSUMÉ

Face of the "Offender"

NANCY EVERSON-BERRIGAN

Peer Support/Program Coordinator (7th Step Nova Scotia) Program/Volunteer Coordinator (7th Step Canada or National) Admin. Pardon Me 7th Step (7th Step Canada)

Dans le contexte de son propre parcours à travers le traumatisme et la récupération, et offrant un aperçu de l'histoire et des programmes de 7th Step, ce numéro offre une vue holistique de la façon dont les traumatismes non-résolus dans le domaine de la justice pénale minent la sécurité publique. Everson-Berrigan, Rédactrice invitée de ce numéro, rassemble des contributions éclairantes de divers intervenants du secteur de la justice, tels que des travailleurs de soutien par les pairs et des bénévoles non-délinquants, y compris un avocat criminaliste, un procureur de la Couronne, des étudiants, des clients actuels de 7th Step, un agent correctionnel, un professeur à Saint Mary's University (NS), entre autres. La Société 7e Étape du Canada, fondée en 1967, et ses sections provinciales sont là pour vous aider !

Her version of the 7 Steps to Freedom¹

EL JONES

Journalist, activist, professor and former Poet Laureate

Dr. El Jones (Acadia University) explores the 7 Steps to Freedom in a verse. This "Poem by El Jones: Her version of the 7 Steps to Freedom" offers contextual detail and imagery that will give readers a nuanced understanding of the concept, logic, and dynamic process of 7th Step's peer support for incarcerated and formerly incarcerated individuals. Reprinted with the permission of 7th Step Nova Scotia: www.7thstepns.com/the-7-steps

There are lessons we've learned that we let ourselves forget:

Before we could walk, first we crawled and we crept

Once we accepted we could move forward

That's when we leapt

And when we could hold ourselves up

Then we reached a hand back to help

As Martin Luther King Jr Said

You don't have to see the whole staircase

To take the first step.

We don't have to see. Our belief will grant it

When we're down on our knees and don't think we can stand it

In the dark we feel we're alone and stranded

We've reached out before and come back empty handed

And it seems like too much that the world has demanded

Our mistakes seem too deep and we feel like we're branded

But please understand there are always second chances.

*Sometimes it feels like we can barely chase success
Some days we taste the failures that sit heavy on our chest*

But when it seems like the stress makes it hard to take a breath

The pain that we feel it can barely let us rest

Healing seems too far and we don't know what's next

But facing the truth about ourselves

Is the very first step.

And maybe that truth can feel too frightening and ugly

We think if people saw the real me no one will love me

To cover it up maybe we've drunk or we've drugged

But we know the darkest things only grow when

they're swept under the rug.

And when we see that truth

We know we have to change

Realizing there is a Power from which strength is gained

And when we use that power

We start breaking our chains

The second step is taken and five more remain.

It's a journey inside, not a journey of the feet

And being unafraid to see is how we reach step three.

Honesty of self is what we seek,

Examining our strengths and finding where we are weak.

Finding our weakness is nothing to be ashamed

Because our weaknesses become strengths when we give them a name

Through concentrating on our strength we find the power to aid

And so we take the fourth step on the path we have laid.

1. Listen to El Jones read this powerful verse, which is published alongside the 7 Steps to Freedom, on the website of 7th Step Nova Scotia: <https://www.7thstepns.com/the-7-steps>. Reprinted with permission.

*But let me say this: no journey is straight
 Sometimes we find ourselves going backwards, or our
 courage might fade
 Or our purpose gets swayed by the guilt or the hate
 We despair and we wonder if maybe it's too late
 That's when we reach out for help to place us back on
 the way.
 Because we know we were meant for this flight and
 ascent
 We decide that our freedom is worth more than what
 we resent
 And we don't let negativity live in our heads without
 rent
 In step five we continue unbowed and unbent.*

*From a place we were broken we make ourselves
 whole
 You can call it will, mind, determination, spirit or soul
 Every day we set freedom as an attainable goal
 In step six we have grown and we know we're in
 control.
 When we move to new things there are stumbles and
 slips
 Progress isn't easy it never comes quick
 And so many of our walls it's us who put in some bricks
 But we know we can survive when we're taking those
 hits
 Because there's no freedom for one until there's
 freedom for all
 And somewhere in the dark there's someone else
 making that call
 There's someone trying to stand who needs help not
 to fall
 So in the seventh step, we reach back behind someone
 else's wall.*

*There's walls made of metal and locks without keys
 But in the mind and the heart is how we get free
 And from the first step we took in faith before we could
 see
 That journey bears fruit when our me turns to we
 When we give to others we find the strength to be.
 We won't always be strong, we won't always be wise
 Sometimes we shut down with our true self disguised
 But from the lowest of lows to the highest of highs
 When we journey together we know we all rise.*



EL JONES

Poet, Journalist and
 Activist, Halifax
 Nova Scotia

RÉSUMÉ

Her version of the 7 Steps to Freedom¹

EL JONES

Journaliste, activiste, professeure et ancienne poète officielle

Dr. El Jones (Université Acadia) explore les 7 étapes vers la liberté. Ce "poème d'El Jones : sa version des 7 étapes vers la liberté" offre des détails contextuels et des images qui donneront aux lecteurs une compréhension nuancée du concept, de la logique et du processus dynamique du soutien par les pairs de 7th Step pour les personnes incarcérées et anciennement incarcérées. Réimprimé avec permission du site web 7th Step Nova Scotia : www.7thstepns.com/the-7-steps

Volunteer & Academic Perspective on 7th Step Peer Support

DR. ALEXA DODGE

Assistant Professor, Department of Criminology
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Alexa Dodge, an Assistant Professor in Criminology at Saint Mary's University and a volunteer at 7th Step Nova Scotia, describes the 7 Steps' impact on both those with lived experience of criminalization and volunteers. She explains that those with lived experience of criminalization and recovery are able to act as powerful peer mentors due to their deep intuitive insight and compassion. Those with lived experience are able to be a positive force for their peers and volunteers alike. Where a (social) disconnect from community can become the path to recidivism, 7th Step peer support initiates the most important part of healing by implicitly fostering the building of connections within the group, a diverse and supportive 'micro' community. Finally, she describes how 7th Step also supports systems change through initiatives aimed at students, criminal-legal stakeholders and policy makers.

It has been my honour to be involved with 7th Step Society of Nova Scotia and to see the powerful impact peer support can have on starting the healing process for those impacted by criminalization and the criminal legal system. As a professor of criminology, I am well aware of the negative impacts of criminalization and imprisonment and how the criminal legal system often aggravates the traumas of violence, poverty, and neglect that many who are criminalized have faced in their lives. 7th Step Society runs peer-support groups across Canada for people who are incarcerated or were formerly incarcerated. Struck in 2013, the Nova Scotia chapter of 7th Step is a well-established support group fuelled primarily by the deep love and concern of a few exceptional "ex-offenders" and community volunteers. People who were formerly incarcerated (who often refer to themselves as "ex-offenders"/"ex-cons" - though some prefer less stigmatizing terms such as "formerly incarcerated person") act in all levels of leadership roles in the organization, including board and executive director positions. The contribution they make in the community

cannot be overstated. Those with lived experience of criminalization provide deep insight and compassion that benefits their "ex-offender" peers and helps enlighten the volunteers (i.e., community members usually not having been in conflict with the criminal legal system) and the wider community.

I began to volunteer with 7th Step during the COVID-19 pandemic. For many formerly incarcerated people, the stress of COVID-19 created additional mental health challenges as many of our members rely on a community of in-person support groups and support services made less accessible due to COVID-19 protocols. Stay-at-home orders were challenging, and in some cases even retraumatizing for our members who had experienced the extreme isolation of prison. This made the positive supports and changes I saw occurring at 7th Step even more impressive and moving. The peer support and volunteer support provided for emotional struggles and other needs was extraordinary. Most importantly, I saw how 7th Step support groups (or street group meetings as we call them) create and

sustain much needed community and encourage those who have received support to give back by helping support others.

I would later learn how 7th Step Society also supports systems change through educational initiatives that have formerly incarcerated people speak to students (from grade school through university) and professionals/stakeholders in the criminal legal system to help them understand what system changes and resources are needed to better support those who have been incarcerated or are dealing with challenges that could lead to incarceration.

7th Step street group meetings include both "ex-offenders" and "non-offender" volunteers. While some might assume that the volunteers (including professors, former judges, defence attorneys, and undergrad students) would provide leadership in this space, formerly incarcerated people are normally the ones who shine through their leadership and compassion. "Ex-offenders" are there not only to continue gaining support but also to act as a source of support for others. I have seen remarkable examples of leadership, often from "ex-offenders" who first entered meetings with little confidence and little ability to trust and be vulnerable with others. I've seen such people move from taking responsibility for their own growth to creating support systems for others. They regularly provide non-judgemental supports in the group and pull from their lived experience to show deep compassion.

I have seen people go from having little ability to express their own emotions, to being people who are able to expertly support someone in crisis and create a space where people who have been disconnected from community through criminalization and/or pre-existing trauma and neglect come to feel (sometimes for the first time in their lives) that they have people they can rely on and reach out to.

I have been honoured to witness "ex-offenders" emerge from the depths of struggle and anger to become leaders and carers. I have again and again witnessed people arrive appearing angry or disconnected to become people who show their huge capacity for love and compassion once they finally have a safe place to share this part of themselves with people who understand what they

have been through. The vulnerability and honesty that emerges in these spaces is something that is rare to witness in society in general, let alone from those who have experienced varying levels of social disconnection and violence. I truly believe that relationships are everything and that positive connection to community is the most important form of healing – this is what 7th Step provides.

References

Hornby, Susan. (2012). A New Identity: The Place of the 7th Step Society in Offender Reentry. Calgary, AB: The 7th Step Society of Canada.



ALEXA DODGE

Alexa Dodge is an Assistant Professor in Criminology at Saint Mary's University in Halifax, Nova Scotia. She is currently researching informal, restorative, and legal responses to technology-facilitated violence.

RÉSUMÉ

Volunteer & Academic Perspective on 7th Step Peer Support

DR. ALEXA DODGE

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Alexa Dodge, professeure adjointe en criminologie à l'Université Saint Mary's et bénévole à 7th Step (Nouvelle Écosse) décrit l'impact des sept étapes sur les personnes ayant une expérience vécue de la criminalisation. Elle explique que le fait d'avoir vécu la criminalisation/rétablissement fait en sorte que les personnes agissant comme 'soutien des paires' soient des puissants mentors comportant une profonde intuition et compassion. Ces gens apportent une force positive pour leurs 'pairs' ainsi qu'aux bénévoles au 7th Step. En voyant qu'une déconnexion (exclusion ou isolation sociale) de la communauté figure souvent dans la récidive, le soutien par les pairs du 7th Step initie la partie la plus importante de la guérison en favorisant implicitement l'établissement de liens au sein du groupe, une collectivité micro qui est diversifiée et solidaire. Enfin, elle décrit comment 7th Step soutient également des changements systémiques grâce à des initiatives destinées aux étudiants, aux parties prenantes criminalisées et aux décideurs politiques.

Through the Eyes of a Correctional Officer: Peer Support and Women Involved in the Criminal Justice System

TAMMY MACDERMAID

Correctional Officer
2023

As a 24-year veteran Correctional Officer, the author can attest to the need for and benefits of peer support for incarcerated women. Noting that peer support, first implemented in Canada's mental health sphere some 50 years ago, was slow to catch on in criminal justice, MacDermaid heartily applauds its application at New Brunswick Women's Correctional Centre through 7th Step Peer Support and Taking Responsibility Program. Aiming to prevent recidivism by establishing positive peer connections and making additional effective and much-needed supports accessible, including post-release, this program opens the door to enduring individual and social change – the hallmarks of prevention.

Not a new idea in the criminal justice system, peer support has been around for the past 55 years in various forms, including 7th Step¹. Peer support has been utilized in prisons and jails across different countries and has found a home in the various communities along the way.

Historically, its origins go back to 18th century France, but Peer Support did not gain popularity until the 19th and 20th centuries when many survivors of the psychiatric system were trying to bring their stories and experiences to the public by writing pamphlets and establishing advocacy groups (Colorado Mental Wellness Network, 2022 [<https://cmwn.org/>]).

Peer support has grown from just being a mental health aspect of self-help in the 1970's. During a time when the focus was on civil rights and social change, people who had suffered similar trauma came

together to support each other and work toward healing. Peer support, for those involved in the justice system and need support for reintegration, is available to assist with positive peer interactions (a good sense of community belonging) and a focus on programs to help with addictions (where to find them and encouragement to participate in them), employment and housing (understanding the challenges being faced in this area and providing encouragement and positive action). This peer support can be delivered while a person is incarcerated and following the individual through release, reentry and community supervision... with the specific goal of preventing recidivism.

Step one of 7th Step is facing the truth about yourself and the world around you and deciding you need to change. Without the sincere desire to make the necessary changes within themselves to move forward, to put the work in, one will not progress

1. "7th Step is a program" (7th Step Society of Canada - <https://7thstep.ca/>)

past what they already know or are familiar with. Truth is, that isn't completely true. Maybe to take that step people need to know that others are there to help them, to show them that there is a different way to do things. Wouldn't it be terrifying to think that the only way to change is to leave the only life you know, the only people you've known and to live a life in a way that is unknown to you? People have imagination and it can scare the hell out of them to think of these things.

Despite knowing that their circumstance might not be great, how a person lives and who they live it with, is what they know. So how do you introduce a person to the idea that you can live a life of FREEDOM? Well, that's pretty easy! You introduce them to peer support people with lived experience... the living example (proof) of how a person that had similar circumstances has put the work in, made the necessary changes to have a life full of meaning, has worked on their addictions, mental health, traumas and chooses not to participate in crime. A good peer support person is ready to share their own experiences to help another person get to their next success and to keep their freedom.

AS A 24-YEAR VETERAN CORRECTIONAL OFFICER, I CAN ATTEST TO THE NEED FOR AND BENEFITS OF PEER SUPPORT FOR INCARCERATED WOMEN

I have stayed in this field for so long because I see the good in people. I have learned to see through the trauma, anger, addiction and hopelessness of the women that I have worked with and cared for. I see people who want something better but are lacking the help they need to get there. I have heard them speak about their dreams; I have watched them console one another in their darkest moments when they are feeling like the world abandoned them. The caring and concern are amazing. I have also seen the fear of change, of the unknown that they are facing. I have seen the relief that having a safe place to live, food to eat and a place to sleep has given them. Some have said jail saved their lives; others weren't so lucky after leaving that place. It made my heart hurt.

Peer support has been offered in various programming. The John Howard Society came in to do a peer support training for the women on sharing that information about hepatitis C both in the Institution and out in the community when they left. There have been similar types of programs over the years, but the peer support within the 7th Step Society introduced in the Taking Responsibility Program is something different.

TAKING RESPONSIBILITY PROGRAM IN THE CARCERAL SETTING

Within my workplace, New Brunswick Women's Correctional Centre, our women are offered the 7th Step Society Workbook. The workbook works to have a person focus on each of the 7 Steps to Freedom and gives a good overview of what 7th Step is about. If interested, a prisoner can sign up for the Taking Responsibility Program offered at the institution. Each week one of the steps is discussed in depth, forging a bond of trust between the participants and peer supporters (including the volunteers). An invitation is generally given to join 7th Step in the community at conclusion of the program. The role of volunteers is to organize and facilitate the program, but through this they also provide essential support.

Peer support is the role of a genuine leader, a person who has worked hard to find and keep freedom, a person that will share with you how they did this and make good working suggestions for you so that you can do it too. Peer supporters give real-life examples of what each step means to them and how they were able to make it work for them. Peer support means you don't have to do this alone. Volunteers and peer support are readily available if you need to talk, need some advice, need to vent or cry, need information or just need a friend who cares and wants to see you succeed.

One of my personal observations about peer support has been that the prisoners participating in the Taking Responsibility Program don't want to hear much from the volunteers but are respectful with listening to what they are saying. Women who participate in the Taking Responsibility Program

want to see, listen and talk to the peer support person who is there for them. Women want to know how they got clean and are staying that way, how they ditched the people who were bad for them and made new connections, how they got an education, how they got a good job despite having a criminal record and how they mended relationships with the people in their lives that really did matter and/or have their best interests at heart. Women also share their regrets, their successes, their hearts—their lives—in the most accepting group you could ever imagine.

Everyone has their own story and no two stories are the same. Following each meeting the conversation most times gravitates toward the peer support person, how much the women admire them and want to do what they are doing and talking about how they will eventually get there. It is possible and the possibilities are limitless with genuine support, the kind of support that 7th Step Society offers.

CONVENTIONAL INTERVENTIONS ARE NOT AS EFFECTIVE AS THEY COULD BE: PEER SUPPORT IS AN ANTIDOTE

The evolution of peer support has taken it from a one-source topic such as support against Hep C into a multifaceted domain that is resource based. It encompasses Addictions, Mental Health, Personal Trauma, Education, Employment, Housing and Prosocial Relationship Building. All of these focus on personal accountability and the building up of the whole person... where they need it the most, when they need it the most and to pick them back up when they aren't at their best, no judgement.

So what has changed in the past 20 years from the perspective of this frontline staff? The realization that current interventions in Corrections, if any, are not as effective as they could be in curbing recidivism, that the type of drugs people are using have evolved along with the effects they have on people – and the next generations coming up, who may not be off their cellphones long enough to learn how to have a good conversation. The individual needs of a person leaving incarceration are definitely not a one size fits all scenario. The person leaving incarceration with a lot of needs will need as many interventions in place to address those needs.

Taking away any criminogenic factors, you still have the basics of need, survival, a place to live, food to eat, a job to pay your bills, access to medication, belonging in the community and support from that community. That individual may also need education or training to get into the workforce. Access to a cellphone or computer is essential nowadays as most resumes are submitted that way. The world has become fast paced and access to the internet has exploded life in so many different ways. Banking is online, working is online, communication is online.

Someone who has spent any significant amount of time incarcerated is already at a disadvantage by fact of technology alone. Programs that bridge the needs of the formerly incarcerated to the community will be the new saving grace on how to truly help people to adjust and succeed.

A NEW WAY OF THINKING IS DAWNING

On a final note, there is a new buzz in the Corrections community. The importance of community interventions, follow-up and support are being realized. An awakening is happening; the war on drugs is over and we lost. A new way of thinking is on the horizon. The realization that people need to belong—need to be valued and cared for in the smallest ways upon reentry into the community—may be the difference maker. The changes in recidivism rates everyone is talking about may be realized if the right help is given to the people who need it the most.

Imagine a world where stigma is replaced with compassion, where addiction is treated as a medical need instead of a criminal one. Social change will be at the forefront, pushing for the evolution of what doesn't work into a new era of addressing things a person needs to help them heal. I want to be on the frontlines to see this happening, to be part of the change so that I have something positive to tell everyone about in 20 years. Until then, I will volunteer my time and do my best to help the people who need it.



TAMMY MACDERMAID

I have worked in the Criminal Justice system since 2001. 22 of those years was as frontline staff: Correctional Officer. For the past several years I have been working as Program Support Officer at New Brunswick Women's Correctional Center. Over the span of my career, I have worked with youth as well as adult men and women. My volunteer work includes sitting on the National 7th Step Society's Board, representing New Brunswick. I facilitate the Taking Responsibility Program at the Women's Correctional Centre, as well as street group support meetings (online and live) for 7th Step in New Brunswick. Supporting "ex-offenders" and their successful re-entry into the community is important to me.

RÉSUMÉ

Through the Eyes of a Correctional Officer: Peer Support and Women Involved in the Criminal Justice System

TAMMY MACDERMAID

Agente des services correctionnels
2023

Œuvrant comme agente correctionnelle depuis 24 ans, l'autrice peut témoigner la nécessité et les bénéfices d'un soutien par les pairs pour les femmes incarcérées. Notant que le soutien par les pairs a été mis en œuvre pour la première fois dans le domaine de la santé mentale au Canada il y a environ 50 ans, mais inégalement utilisée en justice pénale, MacDermaid applaudit son application au Centre correctionnel pour femmes du Nouveau Brunswick dans le cadre du programme *Taking Responsibility*. Visant à prévenir la récidive en établissant des liens positifs et en rendant accessibles des soutiens supplémentaires, y compris après la libération, ce programme ouvre la porte à un changement durable, individuel et social – les traits distinctifs de la prévention.



7th Step Society of Canada: History and Programs

7TH STEP SOCIETY OF NOVA SCOTIA¹

Reprinting selections from various texts about the origins and history of 7th Step Society of Canada, this article offers an overview of 7th Step's innovative and longstanding triad model of peer support as well as its institutional programs including an historical perspective. The inside back cover of this Special Issue of the Justice Report offers a current list of 7th Step locations in Canada.

The 7th Step program originated in Kansas State Prison in 1963 organized by an ex-convict, Bill Sands, and Reverend James Post. Bill Sands was a maximum-security inmate. He came from wealthy parentage but suffered abuse growing up and wound up in San Quentin Prison in California, serving a life sentence when he was only 19. A "recidivist offender" himself, Bill Sands gained inspiration through San Quentin's Warden at the time, Clinton Duffy, and in 1963 Seventh Step took its first step. It was designed to reach the recidivist; the rounder, the hardcore convict population with the end goal to reduce and eliminate those recidivist behaviours. By reformatting the 12 steps of AA into 7 steps to fit the principles of freedom and the value on that freedom, individuals are challenged to think realistically and take responsibility for their thoughts, attitudes, and behaviours.

7TH STEP PEER SUPPORT MODEL TRIAD

The main premise of 7th Step is perspective. For the individual to gain a well-rounded perspective of the society they will have to re-enter, the triad of membership is imperative. This triad includes the "non offender" (volunteer), the "ex-offender" (lived experience), and the "current offender"

(incarcerated). The "non-offender" plays a crucial role by bringing a perspective and offering new ways of thinking and acting for the "offender". Bill Sands passed away in 1967, the same year 7th Step was introduced into Canada by Tom Gordon, Jim Sabourin and Jack Lynch. First, into youth facilities at Haney Correctional Institute and then into other adult facilities in the lower mainland in the Vancouver Area. The first institutional group was in a BC Penitentiary. The program flourished in this setting and other groups opened in adult institutions across that province. Another B.C. inmate, Pat Graham, carried the philosophy and program into Alberta where it was established in 1971. At approximately the same time, Reverend Charles Bell opened chapters in the Province of Ontario, using portions of the Seven Steps program. Under the direction and passion of Pat and Bea Graham, the Seventh Step Society of Canada became a registered charity, a non-profit organization in 1981, and remains in current good standing with the Government of Canada.

Today, the 7th Step Society of Canada has groups inside institutions, jails and communities throughout the country. The internal structure of 7th Step

1. This article is a reprint of a collection of texts from (mainly) 7th Step Society of Canada website at <https://7thstep.ca/> and 7th Step Nova Scotia <https://volunteerhalifax.ca/nonprofit-organization/the-7th-step-society-of-nova-scotia/> and Alberta 7th Step Society. See the inside back cover of this Special Issue of the Justice Report for a current list of 7th Step locations in Canada. Reprinted with permission.

Society of Canada reflects the same triad principle as does peer support, comprising "non-offender" volunteers plus persons who have encountered criminal law difficulties, regardless of age, gender, race or age. Volunteers include retired parole officers, probation officers, lawyers, students, retired judges and anyone interested in helping people not go back to jail or prison. Groups use a "hot seat" to promote accountability to the 7 steps. We work with corrections, parole, and probation to help persons succeed in reintegration. Members of our group speak to classes and criminal justice groups (judges, schools, police and parole and probation). Persons with records often attend jails and prisons to help those incarcerated see an alternate way of living. 7th Step members support our Pledge and the Seven Steps to Freedom. We are a self-help group, and though not faith-based, we are based on the faith that persons can change and be productive members of the community when provided with support.

7TH STEP PEER SUPPORT PROGRAMS

7th Step programs are designed to reduce recidivism by helping "current offenders" (incarcerated people) and others who have had conflict with the law change their behaviours and attitudes using a basic self-help philosophy. Its fundamental principles are realistic thinking and positive peer support.

7th Step has always operated from a Peer Support model. Now, some provinces are able to grow in this area by offering support from Peer Support Workers, who are hired and trained by 7th Step. Peer Support makes a positive difference in the lives of incarcerated people, formerly incarcerated people, individuals who are on house arrest/parole/probation, and individuals who have or are at risk of having conflict with the law.

The primary objective is to continue our individualized support and relationship building through sharing experiences and listening to members. Peer Support is a key component to successful recovery, strengthen users' connection to their recovery community, connect members to useful external resources, and help our members grow into valuable members of our communities.

The guiding principle of the 7th Step Peer Support model is that all people have value, and by offering



GEORGE MYETTE

George Myette has been involved with 7th Step for 50 years! A role model and mentor to many, Myette continues to guide and support 7th Step as the organization grows. After overcoming his own personal struggles with the criminal justice system early in life, George Myette graduated from Mount Royal College (now Mount Royal University) in 1975 with a Diploma in Criminal Justice and helped to establish the Alberta Seventh Step Society as an agency with halfway houses in Calgary and Edmonton. He left the justice system in 1982 and went on to build a successful career in the corporate sector until his retirement in 2015. During this time, George continued to give back to his community by volunteering until 2010 in various capacities as a director with the Alberta Seventh Step Society and has been a 7th Step Society of Canada director since 1984. He became its National Executive Director (Volunteer) in 2002. He has served several terms on the executive of the National Associations Active in Criminal Justice (NAACJ) and has been active as a director since 2002. In 2019, George received the Ed MacIsaac Human Rights in Corrections Award from the Office of the Correctional Investigator of Canada for his long service to incarcerated individuals. George has Metis roots and his unique insights and lived experience have made him a knowledgeable advocate for criminal justice reform.

support, encouragement, and guidance from someone with lived experience, individuals are able to access help and experience hope for recovery through relationships that do not further stigmatize them.

Peer Support Training (28 hours/Continuous)

This program is designed to introduce the principles of peer support & the role of a peer support worker. It covers the fundamental aspects of peer support to serve as the basis for the program for individuals to begin their journey in the peer support field. Some of the areas included in the training are Boundaries, Ethics, Confidentiality, Trauma Informed, Communication Skills, Healthy Relationships, Stages of Crisis, Suicide Awareness, Recovery & Change, Self-Care. We hope to facilitate this training program within the community, in our province and across Canada.

Taking Responsibility Programs (in Jails or Prisons)

Taking place inside the carceral institution, the 7th Step Taking Responsibility program focuses on the 7 Steps and how we can change ourselves by changing negative thoughts, attitudes, and behaviours through accountability for past transgressions as well as current choices. Discussions of strengths and weaknesses include how those strengths can help one succeed in the community: being real, honest and responsible, goal setting, problem solving, and developing new coping skills and strategies. We discuss how having the desire to “do something different” with their lives is what will assist with their successes - including staying away from negative people, things, and events that originally led them away from their freedom. The 7 Steps to Freedom act as guiding principles for our members as they navigate life.

The Taking Responsibility program has a range of topics that focus on the 7 steps to Freedom, which include recognizing one’s strengths and weaknesses, personal values, emotions, ways we can change, the impact of self talk, working through resentments, S.M.A.R.T. goals and how to set them, and finally, helping ourselves and others. This program was designed to empower participants to recognize their

strengths and weaknesses with the goal of starting a journey of honest self reflection and actionable change that results in freedom after incarceration. The program consists of 7, 2-2.5-hour sessions over the course of 7 weeks. Participants in the Taking Responsibility Program receive a personal Workbook.

Each training session has at least two facilitators, some of whom have their own lived experience and have served time in carceral institutions. This program is about "ex-offenders", "non offenders", and serving inmates creating connections with those who were once in their shoes. This program requires 100% participation. At the end of the 7-week program a graduation is held, and certificates are handed out to the participants. Feedback and evaluations forms are also collected. In the end, it is all about change. A Guide is available for all new members.

Community Core Group Programs

Core groups are weekly meetings members can attend to receive support. There are multiple meetings across the province that folks can attend online and in person. These groups are unique in structure with both "ex-offenders" and volunteers.

Institutional Core Group Programs

Facilitated by a volunteer and/or peer. Once a week for 2 hours. Focus is at all times to change the behavior. Members must be voted in.

Reintegration Program (24 training hours)

Planning For Successful Reintegration Into the Community:

Week 1 - Stress Management, Recovery/Relapse Prevention.

Week 2 - Emotions & Self-Management

Week 3 - Relationships

Week 4 - Future Goals, Bringing It Together, and Employment & Education

Week 5 - My Plan for Release, Community Supports & Making Connection

PARDON ME, a 7th Step Program

We assist individuals with what can be an overwhelming and stressful process. We break down the steps to make it easier to navigate through the

Pardon/Record Suspension application process.

The Pardon Me, 7th Step team provides assistance to individuals who are seeking to obtain a pardon or record suspension. People with lived experience work out of 2 offices located in Dartmouth, Nova Scotia and Calgary, Alberta.

Contact PARDON ME 7th Step across Canada

Eastern Region: Office # (902) 406-0324

Western Region: Office # (403) 228-7778, Ext 106

7th Step Outreach and Legal Education

Speakers present their own life stories of their involvement in the criminal lifestyle from the start to finish. This often includes incarceration, the impact of their decisions on their families and loved ones, and in many cases the long-term consequences that follow them far after they left their criminal careers.

Sharing our stories with community groups, schools, universities, and treatment centers educates audiences about the criminal justice system, what it's like to leave an institution, what supports are available, and how the 7th Step Society fills the gap in services for people who have had conflict with the law and those you may be heading in that direction.

Alberta Seventh Step's Community Residential Facility

On July 3, 1977, the doors to Alberta Seventh Step's Community Residential Facility were opened. The operational model for the CRF is philosophically based on the "Seven Steps to Freedom". We are a current (imprisoned or post release) "ex-offender"-based organization firmly rooted in the self help approach to peer and community support for individuals involved with the criminal justice system.

7th Step - Court and Legal Supports

7th Step provides individual support to our members who are presently involved with the justice system either provincially or federally – including support letters, attending court with the member, acting as a character reference and providing emotional support and guidance.



Alberta 7th Step Community Residential Facility
Beds: 35 * Population: Adult Males * Age 18 +
PHOTO: 7TH STEP SOCIETY



PETER BROWN

Pete Brown has introduced countless incarcerated people, "ex-offenders" (lived experience), and "non offender" (volunteers) to 7th Step. He leads by example and is an inspiration to many members.

Peter Brown has been a part of the 7th Step Society since 2014, was accepted as a National Board Member in 2015, and has been employed full time as the National Program Manager since September 2022.

Peter brings a unique perspective to the society through a lens of lived experience, volunteering, education, and work experience when it comes to people in conflict with the law. Peter lives his passion in helping others learn to help themselves.

RÉSUMÉ

Overview of the 7th Step Nova Scotia Peer Support Training Program

7TH STEP N-E

Un aperçu du programme de formation des travailleurs de soutien par les pairs employés par 7th Step Nova Scotia et ou 7th Step Society of Canada.

COVID and Peer Support

AILEEN MCGINTY

Senor Crown Attorney, Nova Scotia

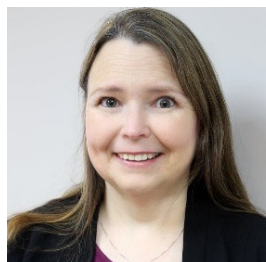
Pre-COVID, informal peer support at Dartmouth Wellness Court was fostered through a requirement that participants in the substance-use disorder program have to sit through each other's check-ins, they can't leave after sharing. Essentially, everyone meets in the courtroom – and they encourage each other. This cohesion was lost when the courts went virtual during COVID. Today, the question for DWC remains, how to establish a formal in-court approach.

The Dartmouth Wellness Court Program is the longest running Wellness Court in Nova Scotia, having been established as the Nova Scotia Mental Health Court in 2009. It has evolved over time and now comprises two court programs - the Mental Health Court Program and the Substance Use Disorder Court Program. The team is comprised of the Judge, NSLA Defence Counsel, Crown Attorney, Probation Officer, and three Clinicians (nurse, social worker and occupational therapist). We also work closely with approximately forty community partners.

We have an informal kind of peer support in Dartmouth Wellness Court (DWC) in so far as some participants do chat to each other/encourage each other, etc. That is why the Substance-Use Disorder Program insists that all participants sit through the whole time in court – they learn from each other. The Crown determines an individual's number of

court appearances and drug testing – at first it is usually every 2 weeks, but the interval increases with progress.

Prior to COVID we did look at developing a formalized peer support approach, but it didn't gain much traction so we (!) focused efforts instead on making and keeping good links to well-established peer support organizations so we can work with them. Prior COVID I think we had much stronger bonds between our participants, but we definitely lost that through having to hold virtual court appearances and to a large extent we're still not back to where we were.



**AILEEN
MCGINTY**

Senior Crown Attorney
Dartmouth Wellness
Court

RÉSUMÉ

COVID and Peer Support

AILEEN MCGINTY

Procureur de la Couronne, Nouvelle-Écosse

Avant la COVID, un soutien 'informel' par les pairs à la Dartmouth Wellness Court exigeait que les participants (programme de traitement des troubles liés à l'usage de substances) restent pour la session des autres. Ils se réunissent dans le court et s'encouragent les uns les autres. Cette cohésion a été perdue lorsque les tribunaux sont devenus virtuels pendant la pandémie. Aujourd'hui, la question pour DWC demeure, comment établir une approche formelle sur place?

7th Step Participant Letters

7TH STEP PARTICIPANTS - TAKING RESPONSIBILITY PROGRAM AT NOVA

The peer support worker/Nancy was the first person I've ever met who has lived experience, and then went on to break the cycle and transform her life. Having peer support available has proven to me that not only is it possible for me to change and lead a healthy and happy life, but also that there are people who understand and will be there to help during the bumps in my journey towards successful living.

7 STEPS TO FREEDOM

1. Facing the truth about ourselves and the world around us, we decided we needed to change.
2. Realizing there is a Power from which we can gain strength, we decided to use that Power.
3. Evaluating ourselves by taking an honest self-appraisal, we examined both our strengths and our weaknesses.
4. Endeavouring to help ourselves overcome our weaknesses; we enlisted the aid of that Power to help us concentrate on our strengths.
5. Deciding that our FREEDOM is worth more than our resentments, we are using that Power to help free us from those resentments.
6. Observing that daily progress is necessary, we set an attainable goal, towards which we can work each day.
7. Maintaining our own FREEDOM, we pledge ourselves to help others as we have been helped.

Nancy Everson is a name I will never forget in my life!!
She treated me with so much kindness & actually cared what I had & others had to say.
She listened to everyone & to everything we spoke of. She always asked how I was doing or feeling.
In here that speaks Volume's I loved the fact that finally someone (Nancy) knew & had been there (here) before she understood it all. She's an amazing lady with a huge heart God love her.
I finally didn't feel alone. I felt heard & respected. She most definitely is in the right place now on the right road as well.
Thank you Nancy... for everything I needed that...

I've been a career criminal for 22 yrs. Within those years you taught to be strong, tuff, closed up, unemotional etc. When I was approached for 7 step my first reaction was fuck no that's not for me, people like me don't need programs that discuss our lives etc. Another inmate begged me to accept so that she would have a friend to share her journey within the program. I can't thank that friend enough. 7 step was an incredible program I now encourage everyone to partake in if/when given the chance. Being surrounded by people of different walks of life, listening, encouraging and Not judging was a good feeling. I walked away each week feeling better about myself, I've always been a confident personality, but this is a different sense of confidence. You become so lost in who you've become that forget who you once were. 7 step and the support involved encourages the dreams and/or hopes for the you that you once were, but reminds you of all your Good attributes and strength you've developed in your rough travel to who you are. Our peer support in our group resonated to the girls in the group. They all seen a little bit of themselves in her story and it filled them with hope of a future not lost. People with addictions especially lose that important "twinkle" in their lives and that's called HOPE, FAITH, and dreams. Peer support aims to breath life back into people one "twinkle" at a time. This program taught me I can be peer support, Being apart of something so incredible doesn't make me "weak" and it's "ok" not to be "ok"

love goes out to everyone in the "struggle" ♥️

I really enjoyed Seven Steps
it made me look different
about my life and other
people's lives, and peer support
worker, her stories made a
~~big~~ meaningful impact on my
life. Anybody can change
with me peer support
worker that proven and thank
you Nancy, Tammy, Jamie



Banff 2024

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39E CONGRÈS ACJP

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Member of the Alberta Court of Queen's Bench since 2019. She was born in Buckingham, Québec, and is a member of the Kitigan Zibi Anishinabeg First Nation



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Chief, Tsuut'ina Nation Police Service on: Overcoming Adversity and Celebrating Success- A First Nations Policing Story



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Judge Michelle R. Brass

Originally from the Peepeekisis First Nation of the Treaty 4 Territory of Saskatchewan. Judge Brass was appointed to the Saskatchewan Provincial Court in 2018.

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Victoria Cowtun: Safe Space, Strong Foundations: Breaking the Cycle Through Restorative Justice

Myles Frederick McLellan: The Prospects for Indigenous, Black and Marginalized Applicants to the Proposed Miscarriage of Justice Review Commission.

Émilie Cormier and Michel Gagnon: Housing older persons with a penal background: the lived experience

Merris Centomo and Michel Gagnon: Elderly people in conflict with the law: a Canadian experience.



Pathways to Healing

Roberto Diaz: Lived experience navigating a path to Healing

Mental Health Commission of Canada, Sandra Koppert & Krystal Kelly: Less Talk More Action: Creating an action plan on mental health and criminal justice

John Winterdyk: Creating guidelines for frontline workers to support trafficked persons: A pathway towards healing and safety

David Redemske: How the built environment can influence positive inmate-patient outcomes

Andrea Monteiro: Debunking the "One Size Fits All" Policy Approach in Corrections

Dr Pamela Yates: Supporting the Reintegration of Individuals with Sexual Offences: The Core Member Needs and Strengths Tool (CM-NAST)

Jo-Ann Stacey: Ohén:ton Saionwátka'we (Section 84 – Early release of the Corrections and Conditional Release Act)

Celine Lee: Moving Forward Together - A Seat at the Table for Victims

Dr. Esmorie Miller: Gender, Race, and Youth In Urban Britain: Historic Criminological Intersections

Jo-Ann Stacey: How We Go Home

Steven Woolrich: Making the Connection - Our Built Environment and Well-Being

Stacey Perlin: Developing Intentional Pathways to Community Wellbeing

Anum Qayyum: Advancements in Utilizing Restorative Justice Practices

Catherine Brooke: Peer Life - Supporting Justice Involved People through Peer Mentorship

Dr. Isabel Scheuneman Scott: Indigenous Perspectives of Indigenizing Canada's Federal Prison System for Women

Marichelle Leclair: Moving Towards Indigenous Cultural Safety in Forensic Mental Health

Stacey Perlin: Developing Intentional Pathways to Community Wellbeing



Public Safety and Changing Paradigms

Doug Heckbert: Who is responsible for educating the public about criminal justice?

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Helene Love and Dawn Rault: Injunctions as an exercise of settler-colonial power

Jessica Rumboldt, Danielle Kouri, Anita Desai: Enhancing Capacity through Reconciliation, Decolonization, and Indigenization for Community-based Organizations

Marlee Jordan (Drug Policy), Steven Deveau (7th Step Nova Scotia): Engaging People with Lived Experience in Developing Municipal Drug Policies

George Myette: 7th Step Society of Canada

Tony Morelli & BeeJay Jacobson: Electronic monitoring as an alternative to incarceration

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Happy Endings

DARLENE M. LUND

Social Worker, MSW

Lund, a Social Worker (MSW), works to create a safe place for people to ask for help. Yet, for decades, Darlene felt unsafe to share her emotional wounds; she hid her authentic self behind an invisible shield she deemed the Code of Silence. This Code—"Tell no one... especially not the police", introduced at the age of three while in foster care—continued into adolescence and throughout her formative years. With tumultuous criminal and acute traumatic experiences upon her, and witnessing the police demonstrating domination over others when called in multiple times by the neighbours, the young Lund began to feel unprotected and unsafe; not only by her caregivers, but the police too. A core belief was deeply embedded, "The police were the enemy"! The Code quickly developed into an Us against Them mindset. In the end, Darlene's loyalty to the Code almost cost her life. Eventually, the secrets became too heavy; daily thoughts of suicide bombarded her. She pondered ...Who could she trust enough to listen, and was she worth listening to? The decision to break the Code and slowly ask for help creates a happy ending. One place Darlene found help was 7th Step Society. In this self-help group Darlene witnessed and practiced accountability, leadership, integrity and humility. Finally, she felt safe enough to simply be her authentic self.

Three little words: "Call the police", were not part of the Code I was raised with. From my earliest memories from the age of three while in Foster Care with repetition from my caregivers, The Code, to which I became an expert witness, was so well ingrained in the deep crevices of my brain, was what was referred to as the Code of Silence!

I was programmed with: "When, (not if), the police show up, they will take you far away, and lock you up". Furthermore, "If you are ever asked questions, the answers are: I have witnessed nothing; I know nothing; and above all things, don't break the ultimate Rule – Do not let them see you cry".

As a little girl I was obedient; I did what my caregivers told me to do: So I stopped crying at the age of eight, and for many, many years, was loyal to the Code and refused to cry. I was adamant too about "not knowing anything", nor did I witness anything! I learned early to hide the truth; unfortunately, my true authentic self was lost along the way too.

Around the age of ten, in an attempt to avoid being attacked in any way, I began to hide under the stairs in a dark closet alone for hours. Eventually, I would physically come out of the closet; however,

spiritually I was so far removed from the spirited little girl I yearned to be that I slowly became lost. Eventually, I found myself believing no one would ever help me; so, I made a decision at ten years old to figure life out alone.

I stopped sharing information—with basically everyone—and I kept silent and lived life with a friendly facade; when in reality, I was afraid to share my unfriendly truth. I was trained early by the adults in my life to hide behind the truth and to wear a mask long before the pandemic of COVID-19.

I would go unseen, unheard, and feeling unloved for many, many more years. My dream was to someday live free: I wanted to live free from fear, I wanted to smile without being reprimanded and, ultimately, I wanted the freedom to feel safe to cry without shame.

As I reflect back to the chaotic days of my childhood, I can chuckle at the contradictions in my perception of life during my days of blind faith. In one ear I was hearing, "the truth will set you free", and from the other ear I was hearing, "Don't tell the truth".

They say, (whomever they are), that the more you do something the easier it gets. Well, I was feeling bewildered, bedazzled and baffled at how easy it was to become an expert in "Code", long before today's meaning of learning computer code was cool.

THE NEIGHBOURS COULD CRACK THE CODE, BUT NOT THE POLICE

As a young child I witnessed a heavy-handed approach by the police – yelling, handcuffing, and aggressively dragging intoxicated adults into the police wagon. And, on the contrary, I often witnessed the police leaving empty handed. The police were easily fooled by the *Code*, they believed the promise of good behavior. Witnessing the "scuffles" rarely left me feeling safe. As young as I was, it was becoming evident to me the police were not the people to call to receive protection.

In hindsight, I understand the neighbours cared enough to call the police. Yet, at the time for me personally, the chaos following the police departures was perhaps more detrimental to my sense of security and well-being than if they, (the neighbors and the police), had simply minded their own business. Nothing was solved, when the police left, the secrets remained...just pushed deeper into the *Code of Silence*.

Without any emotional intelligence during those formative years, I took on others deep-seeded wounds as my own pain. I carried the burden of their shame, and not only did they blame me, I blamed me. I figured I must have done something to cause them to demonstrate the physical, emotional, and sexual violence toward me. Eventually I learned the secrets that I was carrying were criminal, and people would go to jail, and their freedom would be lost if I shared. So, I held my authentic self hostage instead.

THE LONGER YOU CARRY SOMETHING, THE HEAVIER IT GETS

Slowly and succinctly my heart became closed, callous, and cautious to avoid allowing another to see me cry. My vulnerability vibe was locked solid in a vault where neither code nor key could even begin to crack the surface of my locked valuables; I was loyal to the *Code of Silence*! What I have learned from this, though, is that the longer you carry something, the heavier it gets.

"I SEEN" MOST PEOPLE AS THE ENEMY

As is often said, "If you can't beat them join them" – and, at some point as a young child, I unconsciously joined the defensive team of "us", the secret keepers against our opponents, and "them", adults or anyone in authority. I simply lived in isolation from anyone getting too close to me. My perception was that "their" preference was control over others, and I simply was growing weary of being dominated by anyone – and soon, "I seen" most people as the enemy.

Eventually, not only did I stop sharing with the outside world; I stopped speaking in my house and, every chance I could, I avoided being there. At thirteen years old, I stayed out at nights, no one seemed to notice my absence, I found solace in the comforts in feeling free to roam my small hometown streets. My adventures took me to many adult places; yet I felt safer on the streets than in the house I was living in.

Alone is where I felt safe.

Although I had no sincere sense of self awareness, I knew enough to know I did not want others to feel the anguish I felt. Perhaps that is why I kept others at a safe emotional distance from my internal world of woes. Unconsciously, I chose to store my anger deep within my core self. I am aware now, that I sought places to share my emotional wounds; however, through writing, and spending time in solitude – alone is where I felt safest to process the chaos I was exposed to.

FOR MANY YEARS I WAS LOST, UNTIL I FOUND WHAT I THOUGHT WAS THE MAGIC POTION

Previous to finding alcohol, I had learned to be evasive, elusive, and muted to authority. However, when Captain Morgan and I met, I thought I'd found a true loyal friend, a protector, a keeper of the peace. I know now, that when we were together my brain lived in a facade of freedom. I felt free to say what I wanted, do what I wanted, and to make my own rules. While under the Captain's seize, I thought I was running the ship; yet the Captain steered me in a direction that eventually led me to a complete loss of freedom.

With my early ingrained worldview of the police as the enemy, under the influence I blacked out and attacked them whenever they attempted to control my rage; I was literally at war as I battled the authority of the police.

My distorted way of thinking was that I could hurl my unhealed wounds at their protective vests and shields; they regularly disagreed. Repeatedly they won, I was losing any sense of the freedom I yearned for.

I AM NOT WHAT OTHERS HAVE DONE TO ME

They say it is never too late to learn, and what I have learned is that "I am not my past actions, I am not what others have done to me; rather, I am a person living, and learning to apply the lessons my life experience has provided me".

Sure, I could live as Rod Stewart's song mentions, about wishing "that I knew what I know now, when I was younger". When in all reality these lyrics from a song by the Crickets, "I fought the law and the law won", are lessons I never want to forget.

Long before I was ever incarcerated; I felt locked up, imprisoned, and confined to a life of fear

From the little girl unnoticed in the stairwell, to a grown woman – I was always seeking an escape plan. One major area in my life I hid from everyone was my intense desire to learn. I wanted to learn how to help prevent people from feeling the need to live hiding behind their experiences, their truth, their *Codes of Silence*!

AT THE AGE OF THIRTY-FOUR, WHILE SOLELY RAISING MY FOUR-YEAR-OLD DAUGHTER, I ENROLLED IN UNIVERSITY

In 2001, I received my Bachelor of Social Work: B.S.W. degree. In 2002, (We, my daughter has been my greatest motivator), completed a Master of Social Work degree: MSW. I would be lying to say I had removed my masks at that point. I was continuing to hide. As a matter of fact, during our class celebration, I was informed by a friendly bartender that I could no longer be served alcohol due to my high level of intoxication.

"When we don't yet know where we're going, we don't wait. We move forward in the dark. If nothing we attempt yields progress, we rely on belief and will. We may take several steps backward in the sequence to move ahead. If we try ten experiments and none of them work, we have a choice. We can take it personally and think of ourselves as failures and question our ability to solve our problems. Or we can recognize we've ruled out ten ways that don't work, bringing us that much closer to a solution."

– Rick Rubin, *The Creative Act*

I was unaware for many years that not only was my drinking taking me away from something, it was actually taking something away from me. It took my self respect, it took my values, it took my ability to face my stored resentments, to face my sadness, and to face the fact that I was creating a life that was similar to how those who had harmed me lived.

"I have been impressed with the urgency of doing. Knowing is not enough; we must apply. Being willing is not enough; we must do "

–Leonardo da Vinci

AT THE COMPLETION OF MY MSW IN 2002, I BEGAN TO BREAK THE CODE OF SILENCE

During my academic learning experiences, I was feeling like a fraud. Here I was learning new possibilities, new paths forward, toward a life of addressing post traumatic stress; yet I simply didn't know how to ask for help.

I was suffering significantly in silence. Just whom could I trust to share my vaulted valuables, my feelings with? Would anyone care? I remember deciding to raise my daughter with a new *Code*, a *Code of Non-silence*, Non-secrets, Non-stigma in asking for help.

Fortunately, I decided to put into practice what I had promoted to her, and what I had learned, "We all need help". I courageously decided to trust a doctor, and for one of the very first times in my life I said those three words: No, no... not "Call the Police"; rather, I said... "I need help"!

According to psychoanalyst Erik Erikson, the first stage of child development is trust vs. mistrust, because it shapes a child's world view. He maintained that "If a child successfully develops trust, they will feel safe and secure in the world;" On the other hand; mistrust can cause children to become fearful, confused, and anxious – all of which make it difficult to form healthy relationships.

Alcohol was no more a solution for me than was hiding behind the Code of Silence. I decided to slowly open my vault of hidden secrets and to share my lived experience in hopes of helping others reveal their truths too.

In my employment as a Social Worker, I often use an analogy between healing and a math test, (this is for those who always asked where in life would we use math). If, during a test, I give you an answer to a question worth 3 marks and then give you only 1/3 as a score, but I get 3 /3. Why? The answer is that I got 2 points as a reward, because I was able to show my work.

I knew a lot, yes, from books, but more importantly from my life experiences. Yet, I had been hiding the valuable lessons in a vault so hidden from the world. Then it simply got too heavy to carry alone.

I am so very grateful for the doctor who directed me toward trauma therapy, for my daughter who walked with me without judgement, and for a group of strangers I found at a place named 7th Step Society. This self-help group is home to former secret keepers, and current authority figures; Yet just as I learned to turn my life around, I have also learned to turn the letters of US-THEM into THE SUM. At 7th Step, we are together, not against each other.

At the end of my life, I will look back knowing I am more than a sum of all my experiences and, in the end, the three words that saved my life were, "I need help"!

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RÉSUMÉ

Happy Endings

DARLENE M. LUND

Travailleuse sociale (MSW)

Lund, travailleuse sociale (MSW), s'efforce à créer un endroit où les gens se sentent bien de demander de l'aide. Pourtant, pendant des décennies, Darlene avait peur de partager ses blessures émotionnelles; elle cachait son soi authentique derrière un bouclier invisible – le Code du silence. Ce Code — « Ne dites rien à personne... surtout pas la police » — introduite pour la première fois à l'âge de trois ans pendant un séjour en famille d'accueil, a persisté jusqu'à l'adolescence, tout au cours de ses années de formation. Entourée par des expériences criminelles tumultueuses et traumatisantes et témoin de la domination policière au cours des interventions, la jeune Lund se sentait non protégée et en danger – non seulement par ses soignants, mais par la police aussi. Une croyance était profondément ancrée: "La police était l'ennemi". Le Code s'est rapidement développé en une attitude de *nous contre eux*. En effet, la loyauté de Darlene envers le Code a failli lui coûter sa vie. Définitivement, les secrets se sont avérés trop pesants ; les pensées quotidiennes de suicide l'ont envahie. Elle s'est demandé... À qui aurait-elle confiance pour parler, et en valait-elle la peine d'être écoutée? La décision de briser le Code; de demander lentement de l'aide crée une fin heureuse. L'un des endroits où Darlene a trouvé de l'aide a été la 7th Step Society. Dans ce groupe d'entraide, Darlene a témoigné et a pratiqué la responsabilisation, le leadership, l'intégrité et l'humilité. Enfin, elle se sentait suffisamment en sécurité pour simplement être elle-même.



DARLENE LUND

Darlene was born and raised on Prince Edward Island, Canada. Initially she attended the school of hard knocks. Her early life lessons were: "Trust no one; And Tell no one". For decades her application of these principles led her down a path of isolation, into self -destruction, and slowly she was headed toward a dead end. At thirty-four, Darlene turned her life around by attending university. Her greatest life lesson didn't come from a book; nor the school of hard knocks, it came from realizing the freedom in using these three words... I need help! Darlene Lund is a Social Worker with a BSW / BEd. / MSW / RSW, and so much more!

The 7 Steps—Lessons for Life

SOPHIA TRINACTY

Lawyer & 7th Step Society of Canada Board Member

First volunteering with 7th Step as a law student to gain an understanding of the criminal justice system's impact on people, Sophia Trinacty was surprised to find she could employ the 7 Steps in her own daily life. Being a volunteer, a lawyer, and also a member of the diverse provincial board of 7th Step Society NS has broadened Sophia's empathy and educated her as to the practical barriers facing people leaving prison. Noting how talking in school about systemic factors that influence people's behaviour is far less effective than listening to someone describe their own experience, Sophia feels the best thing she can do is help others use the tools of compassionate, communication and accountability and to spread the word about 7th Step so it can help other people. The small acts of positive peer support are cumulative and gradually imbue everyone participating in the group with a sense of self-worth and purpose.

When I joined the 7th Step Society as a fresh-faced law student in 2019, I wanted to gain an understanding of how the criminal justice system truly affects people and take this newfound knowledge with me into my career. I never expected my involvement with the group to change my relationship with myself, and how I interact with the world.

The group made me reflect on my role as a volunteer and the assistance I can provide to group members simply by listening and acknowledging their humanity. Everyone deserves to feel seen and cared about, from the person who makes your to-go coffee order, to the stranger you smile at on your morning commute – small moments of connection matter. Experiencing how impactful meaningful human connection can be within a meeting got me thinking about how I could employ those techniques in my day-to-day life.

Taking time every week to check-in with other members and talk about our weeks has broadened my empathy and given me a chance to learn about the practical barriers people face when they leave prison. Its one thing to talk about these barriers in a classroom, its an entirely different experience to hear someone describe how their mental health is

impacted by their precarious housing situation. It is impossible to hear the members' stories and not respect them for their resilience and hope despite near-constant struggle in systems that oppress them.

In my job I often hear about people who are being charged with serious offences. My experience in 7th Step encourages me to consciously expand my scope of understanding to include thinking about the systemic factors that may have influenced that individual's behaviour. Without such context its easy to jump to conclusions about a person who is charged with a violent crime.

The stories from members who have transformed their lives represent hard work, resilience, dedication, and courage. It's difficult for anyone to change even a single aspect of their lifestyle. Members who are reintegrating into society have to build an entirely new life. That means ending friendships, moving to new locations, adapting to new careers, building new skills, and most importantly, redefining themselves.

Using the 7 steps as a guide I'd like to show how these steps can be a model for change by describing how each step has helped me redefine who I am:

Step 1: Facing the truth about ourselves and the world around us we decided we needed to change:

I joined the 7th Step Society as a method to learn more about the people I would be working with in my career, without any intention of changing myself. It wasn't long before I realized I could not be a silent observer of the group, I had to be an active participant.

It was easy for me to see commonalities between myself and other group members. The humanity that resides in everyone is apparent when people of different backgrounds come together. Opening myself up to the idea of change was easy, I've always been a perfectionist trying to control and improve myself. But taking an approach that focuses on the truth buried inside me rather than the outward trappings of success was novel. It took months for me to face the truth that my mental health was suffering because I was focused on productivity. It took months after that realization for me to work toward change.

Step 2: Realizing there is a power from which we can gain strength we decided to use that power:

The 7th Step meetings have given me an opportunity to explore my relationship with a higher power. Hearing members share about their spirituality and religion has inspired me to open myself up to accepting a higher power in my life. I remember sharing at one meeting that I was struggling with deciding what direction to take in my life. One member asked me if I had considered asking a higher power for guidance. I took that member's advice and over the next few weeks began seeing 'signs' about which path to choose.

Step 3: Taking an honest self-appraisal, I examined both my strengths and weaknesses:

One of my strengths is compartmentalization. One of my weaknesses is vulnerability. Sharing honestly in the rooms about how my week is going allows me to be more open with other people in my life. When I first joined the weekly street group meetings, I would tell people about things I did each week. What fun activities I had done, the schoolwork I had to do and

other aspects of my busy life. But I didn't discuss how I was feeling during the week. Over time as I became more involved, I listened to how other people shared and how connected I felt to people when they opened up and spoke from the heart, letting us see the full range of messiness that life can bring. Whether that was loneliness and feelings of loss over the passing of a friend, excitement about a new job opportunity, anxiety about court dates, celebrations about sobriety milestones, and everything in between. These moments made me feel connected and made me realize that everyone has different life experiences, but we all experience similar emotions. In time I started to share my emotions with the group, and speaking out loud about the good and the bad has helped me process my feelings and feel comfortable sharing them with other important people in my life, such as friends and family.

Step 4: Endeavouring to help ourselves overcome our weaknesses we enlisted the aid of that Power to help us concentrate on our strengths:

I think before I speak. I sometimes think of this as a strength. But often I think so much about what I want to say, I convince myself not to say anything at all. Its too hard to find the right words that will placate everyone and ensure that nobody is hurt. Members in this group are open and unflinchingly honest with each other. They will call members out and give them the harsh truth that other people may be too afraid to say. However, this from a place of love and support.

I've noticed my communication skills have improved by exposure to this radical form of accountability. I am able to speak more clearly and am not as afraid of how others will react. I'm able to stand up for myself calmly but forcefully. I know that if I show respect for the other person, I can speak my mind without fear of jeopardizing my relationships.

Step 5: Deciding that our FREEDOM is worth more than our resentments, we are using that Power to help free us from those resentments:

A phrase I hear often in meetings is that resentment is like drinking poison and expecting the other person to die. I think that phrase accurately describes the damage we do to ourselves when we allow resentments to take up space in our hearts and minds.

My work with the 7th Step Provincial Board of Directors (Nova Scotia) exposed me to different people and different viewpoints but with the common understanding that we are working toward the same goals. When you work with a diverse group of people there are bound to be diverging viewpoints. Keeping Step 5 in mind helps me see criticism as an opportunity rather than an attack. It reminds me not to dwell on or blame others, but to focus on my own actions and put principles before personalities.

Step 6: Observing that daily progress is necessary, we set an attainable goal, towards which we can work each day:

Having been a student when I joined the group, I was no stranger to setting goals and working daily on deadlines. When I joined the group, this was the step I resonated most with, and felt that I had incorporated it into my life. Over time, I've come to expand my definition of the word goal. Now, rather than seeing it as a means to productivity and efficiency, I set goals that focus on my wellness, like saying no to social events when I'm tired, setting aside time for myself each week, ensuring that I eat foods that nourish and provide me with energy.

Step 7: Maintaining our own FREEDOM, we pledge ourselves to help others as we have been helped:

I grew up having a sense of responsibility to my community, and a desire to help people around me. To me, the 7th Step is an essential attribute that everyone should cultivate. As a lawyer, I firmly believe that the best thing I can do to help others is to use the tools of compassionate communication and accountability in my interactions with people and to spread the word about 7th Step so it can help other people. I've started carrying 7th Step informational posters and pamphlets with me in court because I often run into people who are making the effort to change their lifestyles and move into a pro-social life. I know from members how difficult that can be, and how beneficial the supportive network of 7th Step may be to the person who is trying to desist from crime. Members of 7th Step, those who commit their time to changing their behaviour and giving back to the community have been given favourable sentences where they are able to serve their time in the community rather than in prison. The justice system in Nova Scotia recognizes

the impact that 7th Step has on individuals and the resulting impact on the community when members are able to continue to improve the communities they reside in rather than being removed from them.

The most important thing I've learned since joining 7th Step is that having someone care about you makes a difference. Knowing that people are wanting to see you every week and expecting you to show up creates accountability. Coming to regular meetings creates consistency, and having people listen to you and want to know how your week is going builds self-esteem. Gradually, these small acts of positive peer support grow over time and imbue members with a sense of self-worth and purpose. I know it did for me. Everyone has challenges and everyone needs support. By attending weekly 7th Step meetings I've met incredible people who inspire and support me. Seeing these friends, sharing laughter, and sometimes tears, is a highlight of my week.

I am proud and grateful to be a member of 7th Step.



SOPHIA TRINACTY

Sophia Trinacty became a member of the Nova Scotia barrister's society in 2022. As a young(ish) lawyer she is interested in the

intersections between law and policy and hopes to promote equality by reforming our legal systems so that they are responsive to the needs of our communities. In her free time, she loves to be outside, trail running, camping, and relaxing on patios.

RÉSUMÉ

The 7 Steps—Lessons for Life

SOPHIA TRINACTY

Avocate et membre du conseil d'admin. 7th Step Society of Canada (N-E)

Devenue bénévole auprès de 7th Step en tant qu'étudiante en droit pour comprendre l'impact du système de justice pénale sur les gens, Sophia Trinacty a été surprise qu'elle pouvait utiliser les 7 étapes dans sa vie quotidienne. Maintenant avocate et membre du conseil national diversifié de 7th Step Nova Scotia, elle estime d'avoir renforcé sa capacité d'empathie en tant que bénévole et de mieux comprendre des obstacles auxquels sont confrontées les individus sortant de la prison. Notant que le fait d'entendre parler de l'impact des facteurs systémiques sur le comportement humain est beaucoup moins efficace qu'entendre quelqu'un décrire sa propre expérience, Sophia se focalise sur l'éducation sur la 7ème Step Society et sur les outils de compassion, de communication et de responsabilisation.

A Volunteer on Peer Support

NICOLE LUIS

JD Candidate (2026), University of New Brunswick

A volunteer with 7th Step whose experience includes exposure to mental illness, addiction, and conflict with the law, Nicole Luis (JD Candidate) discusses the adage that ‘people change people’ and how this is reflected in 7th Step’s unique approach to peer support.

“Criminal”, “Offender”, and “Felon” are labels associated with stereotypes given to individuals who have had conflict with the law. These labels are mere words filled with negative connotations that bring individuals to believe that they are terrible humans. But these individuals are the same as everyone else, and the 7th Step Society of Nova Scotia (“7th Step”) can help you see that. Bad decisions don’t make bad people. As a volunteer member with 7th Step, I am able to connect during our street group meetings with individuals who have had conflict with the law. Street group meetings are a weekly peer support group where individuals share about their struggles and successes during their week or anything they need to get off their chest. 7th Step is unique as it is the only support group that consists of both “ex-offenders” (lived experience) and “non offender” volunteers.

I grew up in a relatively poor neighbourhood and was exposed at a young age to friends and family who dealt with mental illness, addiction and conflict with the law. This exposure sparked my interest in criminal law and helping people, which is why I began volunteering with 7th Step. As a young university student, at first, I wasn’t sure how I fit into the role of peer support. I’d attend the meetings, and while I felt that I was taking something valuable away, I couldn’t see how I was positively affecting the members in the group. After a while, you begin to see the impact that groups like 7th Step have on individuals.

PEOPLE CHANGE PEOPLE

Dan Pena – the Trillion Dollar Man – once said, “Show me your friends and I’ll show you your future”. People change people, it’s as simple as that. As

a volunteer with 7th Step, that is my role in peer support. I join the meetings, listen, share, laugh, be my bubbly self and even open up and be vulnerable. From this, I hope, at the very least, someone takes something valuable away from whatever I’ve shared, even if it’s just a chuckle from something I have said. Getting through to one person, even in the simplest form of putting a smile on their face can make a world of a difference.

Since I joined in 2021, I have been able to see many individuals change their behaviour and work towards positive change. It’s amazing to see the growth and journey that some of the members have gone through. Where they were when they first joined and where they are now can often seem like two completely different people – and it’s inspiring to watch.

Although 7th Step is directed towards “ex-offenders”, every individual involved is on their own journey of self-improvement. We do this through making connections and making commitments for progress. Hence, people change people. Being a positive avenue in someone’s life is what I strive for, and 7th Step allowed me to do this. As a law student, I hope to continue with peer support and helping people.

RÉSUMÉ

A Volunteer on Peer Support

NICOLE LUIS

Doctorante JD (2026), University of New Brunswick

Bénévole (7th Step) qui a eu dans l'enfance l'exposition à la maladie mentale, à l'addiction et au conflit légal, cet étudiant en droit discute l'adage « les gens changent les gens » dans le cadre de l'approche unique du 7th Step en matière de soutien par les pairs.



NICOLE LUIS

Nicole Luis is currently pursuing a JD in Law at the University of New Brunswick. She graduated from Saint Mary's University in 2022 with a Bachelor of Commerce degree in Accounting and a minor in Criminology. Growing up in the North End of Dartmouth, she saw many injustices that fueled her passion for criminal justice. As a way to give back to her community, she joined the 7th Step Society of Nova Scotia in February 2021 as a volunteer member and within 8 months became the Treasurer on the Board of Directors. Nicole has continued to be involved with the Society as a Core Group Member and the Treasurer.

Across the (Not So) Great Divide: Reflections on Building Community with the 7th Step Society of Canada

MAUDE MALSON

Criminal Defence Lawyer

Involvement with 7th Step, such as facilitating the Taking Responsibility Program at New Brunswick Women's Correctional Centre last year, has made criminal lawyer Maude Malson understand social isolation as a major factor in recidivism. After all, changing one's life circumstances is hard to do alone and building a lasting support network is not easy, especially while in prison. The 7th Step program creates a 'client-centred' space where people are given the support they need to connect and be in community with their peers.

The first time I set foot in a jail was in 2018. I was 26 years old, a newly minted criminal defence lawyer fresh out of law school. Fueled by gas station coffee, I had driven my 2008 Ford Focus two hours through rural New Brunswick to spend the afternoon meeting with some of my new clients. Up until this point, what I knew about correctional facilities came mostly from TV and movies, or from academic literature I had read while in school. I realized quickly that none of that had adequately captured what a jail feels like. Nothing I had encountered up to that point had prepared me for the feeling that, as those doors lock loudly behind you, you are leaving the real world behind; the place you are entering is something else entirely, its own ecosystem that operates by its own rules.

If you have not been personally involved with the criminal justice system, it's pretty easy to get through life without thinking about it too much. But even those of us who work in this field can be susceptible to focusing on the minutiae of our jobs, or on big-picture ideas about criminal justice without grappling with the human face of that system. Over the past six years, I have done my best to keep my clients and their experiences at the centre of my practice, and to remind the other players in the courtroom that this person, regardless of what they

may have done, is still a member of our community who deserves the respect and compassion we all owe to one another. My involvement with the 7th Step Society of Canada has helped me immensely in keeping this goal front and centre.

Spend a day in any criminal court across the country, and you will likely hear phrases like “public safety”, “public interest”, and “protection of the public” get thrown around a few times. Spend a little longer, and you will start to see how narrowly that “public” is often defined. The implicit message is that “the public” is some sort of law-abiding collective from which you lose membership when you break the law. This can make criminal court a pretty lonely place. The accused person is often physically separated from the other people in the courtroom, underscoring the extent to which they are excluded from the collective the court seeks to protect. In addition to enduring this social alienation, most of my clients have had hard lives and lack the kind of strong support network that helps a person flourish. This isolation is a major factor that contributes to getting stuck in the vicious cycle of recidivism.

Through my involvement with the 7th Step Society of Canada since 2021, I have come to believe that if isolation is a big part of the problem, building a sense

of community is an essential piece of the solution. When I first heard about 7th Step, I was a couple of years into my career and feeling overwhelmed by the challenges my clients faced in trying to turn their lives around. The work I was doing felt futile – sure, I could help a client deal with a set of charges, but if nothing else about their life changed, I was seeing again and again that the same circumstances that contributed to their criminal behaviour in the first place would likely land them back before the court pretty quickly. And there was very little about what happens in a courtroom that seemed likely to address these problems.

All of this really came to life for me when I started helping to facilitate the Taking Responsibility Program at the New Brunswick Women's Correctional Centre last year. Through this program, I have had the privilege of sitting around a table with groups of dynamic and inspirational women while they share their stories. Each time I leave one of our meetings, I am in awe of the strength that these women possess, their resiliency, and their insight into the issues that have landed them in jail. It is a really unique opportunity to hear directly from these women about the factors that they identify as contributing to their criminal activity, and what supports might help them change. It is also an opportunity for me to share stories from my own life, and to connect with our group members on a level playing field that is a welcome change from the confines of the solicitor-client relationship. These women are an incredibly powerful untapped resource for criminal justice reform, and I am so grateful that I get to spend this time with them. Their insight has informed my work and I think (I hope) it is making me a better lawyer.

One of the most common themes that comes up in our discussions is problems in relationships. Often our group members share the experience of giving everything they have to people in their lives who do not reciprocate that support. They feel like they have trusted the wrong people, and like no one has their back except themselves. This is in stark contrast with my own life experience – I have had the benefit of extremely supportive family and friends throughout my life, and that's a big part of what has allowed me to get to where I am today. Before being involved with this group, I hadn't thought much about what it would mean to have to build that kind of support network from the ground up. I had never really

reckoned with what it would be like to be in a tough situation and not have anyone to call. I realize now that has been a great privilege of my life. It made me realize how much I had taken my own support network for granted, and how hard it would be to build that from the ground up.

But, through 7th Step, I have also seen that while building a support network from scratch may be a daunting task, it is also something that is possible. When we create space for people who are struggling to connect and be in community with their peers, wonderful things can happen. I believe that the spaces created by 7th Step and other self-help groups are vital to the success of any of the aims of a healthy criminal justice system, and that these projects are deserving of support from the highest levels. My involvement with 7th Step has shown me that even behind the heavy doors of a jail, wonderful things can happen when people are given the support they need.



MAUDE MALSON

Maude Malson is a proud member

of 7th Step. She served on the national organization's Board of Directors from 2022 to 2024. She is a criminal defence lawyer with the New Brunswick Legal Aid Services Commission in Miramichi, NB where she lives with her husband and their pets.

RÉSUMÉ

**Across the (Not So) Great Divide:
Reflections on Building Community with the 7th Step
Society of Canada**

MAUDE MALSON

Avocate en droit criminel

Participation à la 7th Step, comme faciliter le Taking Responsibility Program au Centre correctionnel pour femmes du Nouveau-Brunswick, a fait comprendre à l'avocate criminaliste Maude Malson que l'isolement social est un facteur majeur de récidive. Après tout, il est difficile de changer les circonstances de la vie et de bâtir un réseau de soutien durable – surtout en prison. Le programme de la 7e étape crée un espace « axé sur le client » où les gens reçoivent le soutien dont ils ont besoin pour se connecter et être en communauté avec leurs pairs.

Tribute to 7th Step Peer Support and Program

SUSAN HORNBY

Vice President, 7th Step Society of PEI

Susan Hornby honours 7th Step peer support as a welcoming place of belonging, building agency, strength, growth and giving.

I think of Peer Support as the ultimate Place of Belonging, the best sense of community, a space where people who have felt alienated, or alone, or sad, or struggling—something that every human experiences—can feel welcome, and empowered.

It is agency and self-worth and strength. It is a place where each person receives and gives.

Because I have fallen down, I know how to climb up – and while I'm climbing, I will reach out my hand and help you to climb too.



SUSAN HORNBY

For approximately 20 years, Susan worked in parole services, first with John Howard Society and for 15 years with Correctional Service of Canada, all in PEI. Since 2010, she has worked with the Pan-Canadian Joint Consortium for School Health (JCSH), where she is Senior Advisor. She has been involved with 7th Step for about 20 years and feels it is one of the truest forms of social justice.

RÉSUMÉ

Tribute to 7th Step Peer Support and Program

SUSAN HORNBY

Vice President, 7th Step Society, Île du Prince-Édouard

Susan Hornby honore le Soutien par les pairs 7th Step en tant que lieu accueillant d'appartenance, de renforcement de l'agence, de force, de croissance et de don.

50 Vibrant Years with 7th Step Society

GWEN GLEASON-GRAHAM

Clinical Therapist, Saskatchewan

Fifty years ago, Gwen Gleason-Graham became a "non offender" volunteer at 7th Step's Calgary chapter. She was a young university student wanting to help a childhood friend gone down the wrong path and participating in 7th Step at Drumheller. Today a clinical therapist and representing Saskatchewan on the 7th Step National Board of Directors, Gleason-Graham finds she has received more than she has given along the way. She has learned that listening is the greatest gift of all, that valuable insight can be gained from lived experience, that people have to want to change, that solutions come with letting resentment go and taking responsibility, and that goals can and should always be pursued.

2024 marks my 50th year with the 7th Step Society. I became involved as a young university student because a friend I had grown up with became a drug dealer and went to prison. He became involved with the first Alberta group of 7th Step in Drumheller Institution. I wanted to help him, so I became a member in the Calgary community group as a "non offender" volunteer. The first important lesson I learned from this organization is that you can't make anyone else alter the journey they are determined to take. Unfortunately, the group didn't change his path in life, but it definitely changed mine.

I had the privilege of getting to know a number of "ex-offenders" and "non offenders" who dramatically changed their lives. I wanted to stay a vibrant member of this organization and learn from them along the way. I discovered what I could do, is walk beside them on their journey. I completed my B.A. degree, and my first job was at the Alberta 7th Step Community Residential Facility (CRF) in Edmonton. The staff included other well-functioning "ex-offenders" with whom I had the privilege to work on a daily basis. They, along with the residents and 7th Step group members, encouraged me to keep pursuing my educational goals and taught me many valuable life lessons which resonate with me still. Today, I am at a Doctorate level in the area of clinical

counselling and I sit on the 7th Step National Board of Directors as the representative for Saskatchewan – further opportunities to learn and grow. I have developed deep, meaningful friendships that have lasted for 40+ years. I have learned that listening is the greatest gift one can give. And if we bother to listen, we often learn and gain insight from the most amazing places – or even within the walls of a penitentiary! I draw on the stories and memories gleaned from those who lived the experience. I learned what it means to take responsibility. I learned what trauma is and the coping skills others need to rise above it. I learned about the triumph of the human spirit and witnessed the resilience members have shown in order to persevere. Through countless meetings and conversations, I have heard members share their thoughts/feelings and have felt honoured to be a recipient of their trust and courage.

However, as much as I hope I have helped others in this way, I know I have learned far more from the members than I have ever given them. I have always been treated with respect throughout my time with this organization. For this, I am forever humbled and grateful.

For me, living the 7 Steps to Freedom means taking responsibility for my actions, allowing a Higher Power to guide me, taking every experience, both negative and positive, as an opportunity to learn and grow from (thus, no resentments). Living with gratitude for this life I have been granted and giving back to others the life lessons learned. It has been the privilege of a lifetime to have been a part of this meaningful and dynamic organization for as long as I have. I hope I have many years yet to participate, and I trust that those who have guided me along the way are proud of me.

Thank you.



GWEN GRAHAM-GLEASON

Gwen is a clinical therapist who resides in Saskatoon, Sk. and is a 50-year member of the 7th Step Society of Canada.

Aside from her work life, Gwen volunteers in her community and enjoys her spouse, children and grandchildren.

Gwen actively practises Mindfulness and gratitude in her daily life.

RÉSUMÉ

50 Vibrant Years with 7th Step Society

GWEN GLEASON-GRAHAM

Thérapeute clinicienne, Saskatchewan

Il y a 50 ans, Gwen Gleason-Graham est devenue bénévole 'non délinquante' avec 7th Step à Calgary. C'était une jeune étudiante universitaire qui voulait aider un ami d'enfance qui avait pris le mauvais chemin et participait à 7th Step à Drumheller. Aujourd'hui thérapeute clinicienne et représentante de la Saskatchewan au conseil d'administration national de 7th Step, Mme Gleason-Graham constate qu'elle a reçu plus qu'elle n'a donné en cours de route. Elle a appris que l'écoute est le plus beau des cadeaux, que l'on peut tirer des enseignements précieux de l'expérience vécue, que les gens doivent vouloir changer, que les solutions viennent en laissant tomber le ressentiment et en prenant des responsabilités, et que les objectifs peuvent et doivent toujours être poursuivis.

Lived Experience: Bridging the Gap Between Academia and Policy

ERIN MILLER

BA-Crim., 7th Step volunteer and board member

During a four-year university program in criminology, the author had an epiphany about what could make university, research, and policy more effective in that field. She learned it by listening to a speaker share his lived experience of involvement with the criminal justice system. When it comes to understanding and supporting those at risk of recidivism or to guide policy and research, Miller points out that lived experience—7th Step’s modus operandi—not only works but is key.

“Hi, I’m Erin, volunteer and core-group member.” This is how I introduce myself on Tuesday nights. I have been involved in 7th Step for almost five years now. I started as a student, thinking I didn’t have much to offer. I became aware of 7th Step when a member of the group came to my university class and shared their experience with the justice system and involvement with 7th Step. It was fascinating listening to this member because of my four-year degree; yet this was the only time I heard a person’s story with the justice system being shared inside the walls of the school. This person and their story made an impact on me, and the one-hour presentation showed me how much was missing from the classes I was taking. After hearing the member’s story, I got involved and began attending the weekly street group meeting.

I started going and just sitting in the group and listening to others share; it took months before I actually shared about my life. The longer I went, the more I was able to get to know the members. People would tell me it was good to see me; it was strange at first because I didn’t think my presence mattered. I think I felt like I didn’t have much to offer – because I didn’t share that same experience of having conflict

with the law and also, was only a student. Slowly, I began to share more and open up to the group. At 7th Step, I shared things I had never told anyone. At the group, I felt like I wasn’t going to be judged for the things I shared.

The outpouring of love at 7th Step is something so powerful. The support at 7th step is genuine and comes from a deep place of caring. In the group, I often hear the adage, “our secrets make us sick”, and I think 7th Step showed me we don’t need to hold onto shame like we are often taught. 7th Step is designed to have its members face things together – to have people share so they do not feel alone, isolated or excluded. The group membership teaches us to lean on one another and creates a sense of community.

Those who have lived through the carceral systems are uniquely poised to help guide policy. Attending 7th Step has been one of the best educational experiences I ever could have had. The members of 7th Step have shown me the vital need for something other than educational experience/learning within our justice systems and programs; true success comes from both. We need the voices of those who

have lived through these systems to guide policy. 7th Step has supported me throughout my education, cheering me on, and believing in my abilities. I have had the privilege of learning and working alongside members on various projects and watching ideas come to life. School is important, but hearing from real people is imperative for learning about what people need.

Hearing from the 7th Step members taught me about support and what people need when decarcerating and reintegrating back into communities. I learned what supports could really make a difference in people's lives and what is lacking in our current system. It has occurred to me many times that people who do not have lived experience, or a connection to people who do, are lacking understanding (i.e., knowledge) about what supports will help people succeed at rehabilitation/avoiding recidivism.

People are given labels and their voices are silenced. 7th Step works to push past the stigma of incarceration to help people take back their power and create a new life. From sharing stories with their communities and supporting people who have walked similar paths, to working with children and examining personal strengths/weaknesses or setting attainable goals, 7th Step is transformative. It is selfless. These members do not owe anyone their stories, but they give constantly and so freely... in the hope they can prevent young people from going down the same path, help someone who just got out, and also to eradicate the "us vs. them" mentality in our system.

Now, five years later, the 7th Step group meeting is more than just a place I go on Tuesday nights. 7th Step changed the trajectory of my life and has given me more than I could ever give it in return. 7th Step has taught me many lessons, and I see how the steps apply to my life. The group has given me many dear friends. I feel privileged to have learned and grown through the years with 7th Step, and watching the members surpass milestones and pave the way for others inspires me constantly.



ERIN MILLER

Erin has been a member with 7th step for the past five years. Being a member of the group helped shape her understanding of the justice system in a way the traditional education system could not. Currently, Erin works as a social worker within the forensic mental health system, supporting people who were found Not Criminally Responsible during their transition to living back in the community. Erin is passionate about working with the community and building connections.

RÉSUMÉ

Lived Experience: Bridging the Gap Between Academia and Policy

ERIN MILLER

Bacc. – Crim., bénévole et Membre du conseil admin. 7th Step

Pendant ses quatre années d'études universitaires en criminologie, l'autrice a découvert ce qui pourrait améliorer l'efficacité de l'université, de la recherche et des politiques dans ce domaine. Ce n'est pas à travers les cours qu'il l'a appris, mais en écoutant un conférencier partager son vécu de sa participation au système de justice pénale. Lorsqu'il s'agit de comprendre et de soutenir les personnes à risque de récidive ou de guider les politiques et la recherche, Miller souligne que l'expérience vécue, le modus operandi de 7th Step, non seulement fonctionne, mais est essentielle.

PARDON ME: A Project of 7th Step Canada

CINDY BRIAN

Researcher & 7th Step PARDON ME Project Manager

7th Step is a program operating out of several provincial 7th Step Society chapters in Canada. The program (7th Step) helps people navigate—or perhaps avoid—the criminal justice system, such as obtaining a pardon, in Canada and come out the other side with self-empowerment in the community. 7th Step case managers are ex-offenders whose lived experience and subsequent training uniquely positions them to successfully provide positive peer support. Lamenting the impact of stigma and the fact that Canadian law has no provisions for automatic pardons (expiry), Brian points out that the need for help that works is great.

The 7th Step Society was established in Vancouver (BC), Canada in 1967. Since its inception, it has evolved with chapters spreading to every province across Canada. 7th Step is a program designed to help "current offenders" (incarcerated people) and "ex-offenders" change their behavior and attitudes using a basic self-help philosophy. Fundamental to our success is the peer approach of engaging and connecting former or "current offenders" through positive peer support through mentorship, reintegration support and planning, and participation in core street groups and training programs resulting in positive reintegration outcomes.

To expand our reach supporting sustainable reintegration outcomes, the Pardon Me 7th Step Program was established in October 2022 under the umbrella of 7th Step Society of Canada in partnership with 7th Step Society of Alberta. This initiative is providing a low-barrier, peer-support model of record suspension/pardon application support services. With a funding grant from Public Safety Canada, we are operating offices in Dartmouth, Nova Scotia and Calgary, Alberta through until March 31st, 2026.

The Pardon Me team represents a fusion of personal experience and professional expertise with each member bringing a unique perspective shaped by their own encounters and history with the criminal justice system. The program is a testament to the transformative power of lived experience, recognizing that those who have moved beyond the restraints of the criminal justice system are best equipped to guide others towards a life free from crime.

The transformative power of lived experience at the heart of the program lies an unwavering commitment to peer support and empathy. Steven Deveau, Case manager leverages his personal experience of having navigated the revolving doors of correctional facilities to successfully reintegrate into the community, gaining a pardon and now helping others to dismantle barriers and instill confidence as they navigate the record suspension/pardon process.

Rick Fenyvesi, Case manager is simultaneously preparing his own application to submit to the Parole Board of Canada while assisting his clients in doing the same. He understands the mental and emotional toll of revisiting one's past while dealing with competing feelings of fear (of denial) and hope (of receiving a pardon opening doors to future opportunities). Nancy Everson-Berrigan, case manager has an innate understanding of such barriers and takes great pride in the efforts she and others are making to move people beyond the systemic and personal obstacles they experience following conflict with the criminal justice system and/or incarceration.

Brannon Hooper, newest member of our team, has experienced barriers to employment because of his past involvement with crime. He notes that by embracing the 7th Step philosophy, he has become a contributing member of the community who is now employed helping people through the pardon application process. Mehmed Duska, our Case manager at the Calgary office, emphasizes the role of empathy in our work and how sharing his experience helps to instill hope in clients, by reminding them they are not lone voyagers in their quest for a fresh start in life.

With lived experience at the foundation, our team tackles each barrier – from financial assistance covering the associated costs of an application and transportation assistance such as accompaniment at appointments, to bus tickets/taxi chits and filling out forms for those who have literacy issues or other support needs. To date, we have supported 275 people with information and/or assistance to successfully navigate the pardon application process.

We are currently working with 175 individuals, 31 of whose applications are pending Parole Board review, 144 are engaging in various stages of the process, and twelve have successfully 'shed' their label as a criminal by gaining a Pardon. Our geographical reach includes 103 people in Calgary, 86 in Halifax, 52 in rural communities throughout Nova Scotia and the remainder are from the neighboring provinces including Prince Edward Island, Newfoundland, New Brunswick, Quebec, Ontario and British Columbia. Our demographics illustrate that our efforts to engage with diverse communities are working with 31 First Nations, 35 Black, 11 other visible minorities and 198 Caucasian.

In the absence of Bill S-212¹, aimed at automatic

expiries for most criminal records, we will continue to address the systemic inequities within the current pardon system. Non-payment of fines shouldn't hinder record suspensions, and mainly because it affects individuals who already experience socioeconomic barriers and associated layers of marginalization. Despite the improvement to the record suspension/application process such as reduced cost for the applications, 61 of the 275 people we have supported did not meet the eligibility criteria due to non-payment of fines.

After investing time and resources, many clients unexpectedly uncover fines from over ten years ago that they had forgotten about. This places them back in the queue to pay the fines and a wait time from 3 to 10 years depending on if their convictions were an indictable or summary offense. This draconian aspect of policy smothers any hopes of returning to school, gaining better employment opportunities or travel; it is resigning people to a life haunted by their criminal record, perpetuating self-shame and the negative impact of social stigma and excluding them from society, depleting their hope and increasing their risk of recidivism. While such barriers persist, our amazing team will continue to advocate and support each person coming in, seeking to remove the labels of the wreckage of their past in their lives today.

¹. Bill S-212 An Act to amend the Criminal Records Act, to make consequential amendments to other Acts and to repeal a regulation, is a Senate Public Bill, sponsored by Senator Kim Pate.



CINDY BRIAN

With over 35 years of personal experience with addiction and recovery she is committed to ensuring programs and services for people who use substances (PWUS) are provided with compassion, respect and dignity. Cindy has developed, implemented or participated in over forty health promotion initiatives and research projects with the aim of improving access to health, ancillary and life-saving supports for people who use substances (PWUS). A former recipient of the “Women of Excellence Award” and co-recipient of the Health Promotion of Canada 2018 Recognition Award. She is currently employed with the 7th Step Society of Canada as the Pardon Me Project Manager. Cindy’s commitment, passion and sense of humor have won many allies, and her fierce, relentless fight has helped to reduce stigma and the systemic barriers that place PWUS at risk.

RÉSUMÉ

PARDON ME: a Project of 7th Step Canada

CINDY BRIAN

Chercheure et gestionnaire, projet Pardon Me 7th Step

7th Step est un programme fonctionnant à partir de différents chapitres provinciaux de 7th Step Society Canada. Le programme utilise une stratégie d'entraide fondée sur le soutien par les pairs pour aider des délinquants et ex-délinquants à naviguer—ou peut-être éviter — le système de justice pénale, soit à travers l'obtention d'un pardon, pour sortir de l'autre côté en s'autonomisant dans la collectivité. Les gestionnaires de cas de la 7e étape sont des anciens délinquants, dont l'expérience vécue et la formation subséquente les placent de manière unique pour offrir un soutien positif par les pairs. Déplorant l'impact de la stigmatisation et le fait que la loi canadienne n'a pas de dispositions de retrait automatisé de casiers judiciaires, Brian souligne que le besoin en matière d'assistance réussite est grand.

The Vital Role of Peer Support in 7th Step Society Canada

SARA TESSIER

Impact Director - Formerly Incarcerated Persons - Northpine Foundation

Alongside insight hard-won from shared lived experience including recovery, the peer supporter workers within 7th Step stand as tangible proof that positive change is possible. Shared experience fosters an immediate connection and rapport with individuals seeking support, creating a safe and non-judgmental space for dialogue and healing. Peer support workers have a keen ability to identify the specific needs of each individual, to personalize the program, and also to help identify and bridge the persistent barriers to appropriate care.

In the realm of criminalization, addiction recovery, and rehabilitation, the journey toward healing is often characterized by twists and turns, setbacks, and breakthroughs. Amidst this intricate path, peer support workers emerge as invaluable allies, guiding individuals through the labyrinth of recovery with empathy, understanding, and firsthand experience. Within the context of 7th Step Society Canada, peer support workers are beneficial and essential, serving as beacons of hope and catalysts for transformation.

SHARED EXPERIENCE, EMPATHETIC UNDERSTANDING

At the heart of peer support lies a fundamental truth: those who have walked the path of criminal behaviour, addiction and recovery themselves possess a unique depth of insight and empathy. Peer support workers within 7th Step Society Canada understand the complexities of criminalization not merely from textbooks or professional training but from lived experience. This shared journey fosters an immediate connection and rapport with individuals seeking support, creating a safe and non-judgmental space for dialogue and healing.

INSPIRING HOPE THROUGH PERSONAL NARRATIVES

One of the most powerful tools in the arsenal of a

peer support worker is their own story of recovery. Through personal narratives, they offer more than just words; they offer tangible proof that change is possible, and that transformation is within reach. By sharing their struggles, triumphs, and lessons learned, peer support workers instill hope in individuals grappling with doubt and despair. They serve as living testimonies to the resilience of the human spirit and the possibility of redemption.

TAILORED SUPPORT AND GUIDANCE

No two journeys are alike. Each individual carries a unique set of challenges, triggers, and aspirations. Peer support workers recognize this inherent diversity and provide personalized support and guidance tailored to the specific needs of each individual. Whether navigating cravings, rebuilding fractured relationships, or exploring new pathways to wellness, peer support workers offer practical strategies, empathetic listening, and unwavering encouragement every step of the way.

FOSTERING A SENSE OF BELONGING AND COMMUNITY

Criminalization often thrives in isolation, fueled by shame, stigma, and loneliness. Peer support workers within 7th Step Society Canada serve as catalysts for connection, forging bonds of

solidarity and camaraderie among individuals on the path to recovery. Through support groups, peer-led discussions, and community events, they create spaces where individuals feel seen, heard, and accepted. This sense of belonging is not just therapeutic; it's transformative, laying the groundwork for sustained reintegration and a renewed sense of purpose.

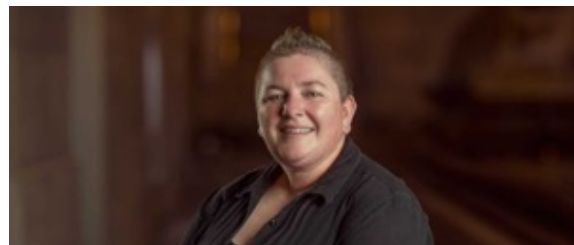
NAVIGATING THE CHALLENGES OF REINTEGRATION

Recovery doesn't end with sobriety; it extends to the process of reintegration into society. Peer support workers play a pivotal role in this transitional phase, offering guidance on navigating employment, housing, legal matters, and other practical challenges. Drawing from their own experiences, they provide insights, resources, and encouragement to individuals as they rebuild their lives beyond addiction. By serving as mentors and advocates, peer support workers empower individuals to reclaim their agency and autonomy in the journey towards a fulfilling and substance-free life.

Breaking Down Barriers to Treatment

Despite the strides made in addiction awareness and treatment, barriers to accessing care persist. Peer support workers within 7th Step Society Canada act as bridges between individuals and treatment resources, breaking down barriers of stigma, fear, and misinformation. Through outreach efforts, education initiatives, and community partnerships, they ensure no one is left behind in their journey toward recovery. By advocating for equitable access to treatment and support services, they strive to create a more inclusive and compassionate society for all.

In conclusion, peer support workers are not just valuable assets within 7th Step Society Canada; they are the beating heart of the organization's mission to provide hope, healing, and holistic support to individuals on the path to reintegration and recovery. Through their empathy, authenticity, and unwavering dedication, peer support workers embody the transformative power of lived experience and serve as guiding lights for those navigating the labyrinth of reintegration and reclaiming their lives one step at a time.



SARA TESSIER

Sara A. Tessier is a dedicated social justice advocate with nearly a decade of experience championing the rights of marginalized, victimized, criminalized, and institutionalized individuals across Canada. With a foundation rooted in lived experience, Sara has worked tirelessly with organizations such as the John Howard Society, Elizabeth Fry Mainland Nova Scotia, and Coverdale Justice Society, providing crucial support to those transitioning out of provincial jails, particularly during the challenging times of the Covid-19 pandemic.

In her roles as an Outreach Worker for the G.A.T.E. program and a Peer Mentor with Coverdale, Sara demonstrated her commitment to empowering individuals by offering guidance, mentorship, and practical assistance. Currently serving as the Impact Director – Formerly Incarcerated Persons at the Northpine Foundation, Sara's focus lies on facilitating the successful reintegration of individuals exiting the Canadian prison system. Her work encompasses a wide range of initiatives, including providing access to legal services, affordable housing, post-secondary education, healthcare, and employment opportunities. Through strategic partnerships, financial support, and expert guidance, Sara collaborates with stakeholders to design ventures that foster meaningful relationships and contribute to a healthier and more inclusive Canada.

Beyond her professional endeavours, Sara extends her influence through advisory roles and board memberships in organizations such as the African Nova Scotian Affairs Mobilizing Partnership Program, Scientific Advisory Committee for the Nurse Practitioner Research Project with Wellness Within/IWK/WAGE, YWCA's Trafficking & Exploitation Services System LGBTQ+ cultural group, and the CAEFS Lived Experience Committee. Additionally, Sara volunteers her time at Dalhousie University's Schulich School of Law, Saint Mary's University Criminology Department, and the Canadian Association of Elizabeth Fry Societies, where she contributes to the educational and professional development of students, professors, staff, and volunteers within the correctional system.

RÉSUMÉ

The Vital Role of Peer Support in 7th Step Society Canada

SARA TESSIER

Directrice d'Impact - Formerly Incarcerated Persons - Northpine Foundation

Munis d'une compréhension profonde de l'expérience vécue, y compris la réadaptation, gagné à leurs dépens, les travailleurs de soutien par les pairs de 7th Step sont la preuve tangible du changement positif. L'expérience commune favorise une connexion et une relation avec les personnes qui cherchent du soutien, créant un espace sans jugement et sécuritaire pour le dialogue et la guérison. Les travailleurs de soutien par les pairs ont une grande capacité à cerner les besoins particuliers de chaque personne, à personnaliser le programme et aussi à aider à identifier et aussi à réduire les obstacles persistants empêchant l'accès au soin appropriés.

Thunderbird Swooping Down Woman

DARLENE GILBERT

Survivor, treaty fighter, activist, and 7th Step Core Group Member

This article transcribes the author's lived experience expressed through the oral tradition. Trauma survivor, treaty fighter, activist for future generations, giver of survivor testimony, mother, Mi'kmaw Grandmother, and 7th Step Core Group Member, Darlene Gilbert Thunderbird Swooping Down Woman speaks of flying full circle. Her story illustrates the need for specialized courts and other alternative legal processes such as Gladue and associated house parole, parole agents, introduction to elders/cultural understanding, as well as integral supports including Elizabeth Fry and effective long-term follow-up and 7th Step. Speaking from recovery, and thankful for ceremony, prayer, and 7th Step's successful peer support system, Darlene Gilbert Thunderbird Swooping Down Woman finds healing in helping others.

My name is Darlene Gilbert Thunderbird Swooping Down Woman. My Band is in Annapolis Valley. I grew up in HRM my mother was Mi'kmaw, also a residential school survivor my father was French, I have a younger brother. I lived with my mother for 11 years until she passed away at the age of 36. When I was 8 I got raped shortly after I was taken away from my mother, while my father was at work. I remember being put in a car with my suitcases and my teddy bear while my mom and brother stood in the driveway watching as they drove me away. I was in the system from the age of 10 until I was 19 years old. I felt the Justice system had failed me. The person who raped me only got 18 months' probation and was ordered to stay 500 feet away from me. He lived in my neighborhood.

I was brought up in and out of child institutions, foster homes, and group homes basically, taking care of myself since the age of 10, always running away from situations not feeling the ability to be believed or heard.

When I was 14, two years after my mother passed away, my uncle Vincent Toney came to my school. In the system I wasn't allowed to see my mother's side of the family anymore, just my father and brother. My uncle had become a social worker to find his sister's daughter in the system. When he found me, he brought me to a native family, he talked to me with an elder and told me if I ever needed him to come here but I had to behave.

I developed trauma while in the system, and became a runner. I began using drugs and alcohol by the age of 16. I decided the best way to get clean was to have a baby. I got pregnant at the age of 17. Became a single mother.

I got involved with an unhealthy group of people from North Preston. I took a beating on Jackson Road in Dartmouth.

When my son was 6 months of age. I met my daughter's father. He left for Toronto to start a new life for us. I left Nova Scotia after the charges were pressed and moved to Toronto.

For a brief period, I came back home to Nova Scotia. I started selling drugs with my daughter's father and we got busted, my son was with me.

We went back to Toronto a year later. When we got there, we started selling drugs on Lakeshore Blvd. My dad died, I had to come back home to Nova Scotia to bury my dad. I was in a blackout. I returned to Toronto with my son after the funeral and ended up picking up a crack pipe. It all went downhill after that.

I became a prostitute to survive and put a roof over my son's head, food on the table and supply my addictions.

In 1985 I worked the streets of Toronto – for 7 years. During addiction my great idea of life, to have a baby and quit using drugs. Well, that didn't work out as planned. I kept using through the whole pregnancy and working the streets.

My daughter was born, and my addictions just continued. I got arrested for stealing diapers because I didn't have any at the time. I've been charged with fraud, prostitution, and obstruction.

I left Toronto in 1992 and went to Vancouver hoping things would change. I needed to start over. One of my kid's fathers was already out there and set up. He had an apartment, job, and what seemed like stability.

We lived as a family for 2 weeks. I went to school for a while until I ended up taking a hit off a crack pipe. That relapse lasted for 7 years.

I lost my children due to my addiction. I tried to get my kids back. I went to a treatment center and got a good lawyer. I won the case while in treatment until I was 6 months clean. I went back to the recovery house to get my grounding and work on myself.

I got an apartment was living as single mom while my kids' father was still using. I stayed in recovery, and moved back home to Nova Scotia to be with family. My son at the age of 14 got to see his father, my daughter was 9 at the time.

We lived in Truro for 7 years, my son got involved in a murder and then I got involved in the same one to protect my son. Through the murder trial I got sentenced to two years less a day accessory after the fact for manslaughter, because the "offender" was a youth.

Growing up on the streets we don't always make good decisions. One good thing that came out of that was a Gladue report, for Aboriginal people in Nova Scotia. I was sentenced to house arrest and had a parole officer.

At that time, I had a 3-year-old child – I was clean and sober for 10 years. I asked my parole officer if I could do programs, because Narcotics Anonymous, and Alcoholics Anonymous taught us we have to give back to society. They gave me permission to find a volunteer job, within 48 hours Elizabeth Fry accepted me and I started a volunteer job with them Monday to Friday 9-4.

I picked up my kids from daycare, cooked supper and went to NA meeting every night. I got through that. I finished my sentence and went back to school. I took the TYP [Transitional Year Program] at Dalhousie. During that time, I went through a lawsuit from my childhood. It brought up a lot of issues and I started drinking alcohol again.

My daughter was 10 years old by this time she ended up living with her sister and I lived with her godparents until I sobered up. During that relapse I picked up a charge for assaulting a Peace Officer and uttering death threats.

I went to mental health court with the help of Mi'kmaw legal service network on July 2, 2017 and went to Delco treatment center in Thunder Bay. By the grace of God, I'm still clean.

I finished mental health court and was asked if I wanted to do a peer support job for mental health court, but I refused – I didn't have the patience at that time.

I was told after 6 months clean that I had stage 4 throat cancer and given the option of 6 months, I went under several throat operations and extreme radiation treatments.

From there I went to the River against Alton gas for grass roots. During the time of my operation and treatment, I had to step away from the Alton gas fight for one year. When I returned, people had erupted on the banks of the Shubenacadie River. I told Mr. Trudeau to his face on national television;” Alton gas will not go through Mi’kmaw’ki.” As a treaty fighter I was arrested in 2019. That case was dropped, they folded.

I started my healing journey when Alton gas left in 2023. During the 4 years of the fight, I stayed clean, and sober leaving my daughter home to care for herself. She understood her mother was fighting for future generations, and that I am a big advocate for Mi’kmaw treaty rights.
How did you get involved with 7th Step Society?
I was asked by a young man named Morty to come to a 7th step society AGM and do an opening ceremony and land acknowledgement.

Afterwards I asked to stay for the whole thing to observe and learn more about the Society. That night I asked if I could join, my name was brought forward to the group, and it was approved 2022.
How has your involvement with the 7th Step Society and its Peer Support influenced your life?
During these last few years of recovery, I have realized that I needed to change, in a good way. Now understanding what generational, systematic abuse played in my mental, spiritual, and emotional wellbeing, learning to heal is and has been a journey.

I’ve been arrested for my treaty rights a few times. I was a part of the proception of our peoples’ rights during the Sandersville lobster war in 2020.

I’ve learned that I need to be on spiritual grounds and be in the right spirit, to be an example to protect our future generations and all who we share Mi’kmaw’ki with.

I am involved today with finding healing solutions for the 60’s Scoop generation as I am from that generation. Giving understanding for others, the opportunity to heal and learn our culture and Education of treaty rights.

I still do house maintenance at the treaty truck house in Stewiacke. This is where I go to garden, fish, lodge, and heal with nature.

I live my program to the best of my ability to be a good example for my children and grandchildren. Now my youngest daughter doesn’t drink, she’s given it up over a year ago.

The way I look at my life if I don’t start changing my behavior for the good and carry a voice for families I knew as part of the MMIW 2S’ inquiry – then who will? I have done my own testimony as a survivor which can be found on the website MMIGI testimony.

Today I have been invited back to what is known now as Akoma family center Nova Scotia, where I withstood abuse. As a Mi’kmaw Grandmother with her daughter to do a Land Acknowledgement, Smudge, and Prayer. That to me is how I’m finding my healing in my recovery journey.

There’s a symbol and saying we have in a circle. To me I came full circle. To come from trauma, to strength, and become a good example.

I’m now a helper, I love to help if I can. This is why I enjoy being a part of the Peer Support Group. 7th Step has helped to keep me on a good track to remember that not all the people in authority positions are mean, or out to do me wrong.

It’s a slow journey, but by being part of the 7th Step Society as a Core Group Member and talking in schools and with others, I’m helping; to see that change can happen and healing is good. Helping others helps your recovery. I will continue to carry the message of this program to anyone who has had conflict with the law and needs a positive change in their life, with support and guidance giving back to society in a positive way.



DARLENE GILBERT

Darlene Gilbert (Thunderbird Swooping Down Woman) is a Treaty and Water Protector in Mi'kmaw'ki. She became a 7th Step Core Group Member in June 2022, in the past she had issues with mental health, trauma, addictions, and conflict with the law. Her mother was a residential school survivor.

Darlene brings uniqueness to our group not only with her lived experience and being a 60's scoop survivor but with her traditions as a Mi'kmaw grandmother teaching us about her ancestral culture and education on treaty rights.

Darlene continues to be readily involved with 7th Step supporting other members as they join our society, taking part in presentations, and being an asset to the community influencing others to change their behaviors and become useful members of society.

RÉSUMÉ

Thunderbird Swooping Down Woman

DARLENE GILBERT

Survivante, membre Core Group 7th Step et militante de la justice sociale

Cet article 'tradition orale' retranscrit l'expérience vécue de l'auteur. Survivante du traumatisme, combattante des traités, activiste pour les générations futures, témoigne survivante, mère, grand- mère mi'kmaw et membre du 7th Step Core Group, Darlene Gilbert Thunderbird Swooping Down Woman a bouclé la boucle. Son histoire illustre la nécessité des tribunaux spécialisés et d'autres processus juridiques alternatives, comme l'arrêt Gladue et la libération conditionnelle à domicile, les agents de libération conditionnelle, l'introduction aux aînés / à la compréhension culturelle, ainsi que des mesures de soutien intégrées, y compris Elizabeth Fry, de suivi du terme et 7th Step. Reconnaisante pour la cérémonie, la prière et le système réussi de soutien par les pairs de 7th Step, Darlene Gilbert Thunderbird Swooping Down Woman trouve la guérison en aidant les autres.

The 7 Steps Pledge Mi'kmaq / English / French

Kejitu ta'n tel seyey wejiaq
ta'n telita'si aqq tel-lukwey
ni'n wesuwa'lsi ankaptmn aqq
wkswa'tun taqoey teliaq ukjit
ni'n siaw klo'tmn ta'n tel-
seyey na' tal-lukwen
mimajuaqniktuk apoqnmuan
ktikik ta'n ni'n teli
apoqnmuksiap

Knowing that my freedom
depends upon my thoughts
and actions; I hereby
pledge: To face and accept
the truth about myself, to
maintain my freedom, to
become a useful member of
society, to help others as I
am now being helped.

Engagement de la 7th Step :
Sachant que ma liberté
dépend de mes pensées et
de mes actions, je m'engage
par la présente à faire face à
la vérité sur moi-même et
l'accepter, conserver mon
libre-arbitre, devenir un
membre utile de la société et
aider les autres comme on
m'aide actuellement.

www.7thstepns.com

7th Step Peer Support Nova Scotia: Why It Works



7TH STEP SOCIETY OF NOVA SCOTIA

This article offers an overview of Peer Support by 7th Step Nova Scotia.

7th Step NS, a provincial chapter of the 7th Step Society of Canada, was established in 2013 by Halifax lawyer Mark Knox and is known nationally for our community outreach projects, strong presence in institutions, and groups. 7th Step is a program designed to help persons in conflict with the law change their behaviour and attitudes using a basic self-help philosophy founded on Realistic Thinking and Positive Peer Support.

In the fall of 2019, several members of the Nova Scotia Chapter of the 7th Step Society came together to create a peer support training program by "ex-offenders" for "ex-offenders" in the province. With financial support from 7th Step Society of Canada, a first Peer Support Training Program was delivered in Halifax, Nova Scotia in the spring of 2021. Through virtual delivery, the program has now grown to be a national program facilitated across Canada.

Peer Support Training has a range of topics, such as: What peer support is, ethics, values, how to set boundaries, stages of crisis, confidentiality, stigma, unconscious bias, trauma informed practice, active listening skills, healthy relationships, the process of recovery, self-care, and much more. The program also includes guest speakers throughout the sessions to help participants dive deeper into certain topics. This program was designed with the idea of empowering participants to use their unique life skills to help others and to fill the gaps in formal support within their community. The 28-hour program can be facilitated over an 8-hour initial class plus eight 2.5-hour weekly sessions, or a continuous 10-week program.

Each training session has two facilitators, themselves graduates of the peer support training program and have formal or informal experience in peer support. The program is very versatile and can be delivered in-person and/or virtually with groups of 8 participants.

When we receive a certificate of completion from the Peer Support Training Program, we move from being informal peer supports to formal ones. Peer support workers provide hope and support through understanding. Our own self-reflection, identification, authentic listening and communication of personal experiences benefit those being supported. We build relationships with the participants as they move towards their self-determined goals. Peer Support Workers use strengths-based and recovery-oriented approaches with individuals and/or groups to help combat stigma, promote self-determination, and instill hope.

WHY 7TH STEP WORKS: PEER SUPPORT!

7th Step NS employs an Executive Director, Steve Deveau, and three Peer Support Workers: Nancy Everson-Berrigan, Dominic Thomas, and Brannon Hooper.

RÉSUMÉ

7th Step Peer Support Nova Scotia: Why It Works

7TH STEP N-E

7th Step of Nova Scotia donne un aperçu du soutien par les pairs fourni par 7th Step Nova Scotia et/ou 7th Step Society of Canada.

i) Sands, B. (1967). The seventh step. New York, NY: The New American Library.

ii) Mental Health Commission of Canada. Guidelines for the Practice and Training of Peer Support. <https://www.mentalhealthcommission.ca/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/Guidelines-for-the-Practice-and-Training-of-Peer-Support.pdf>



STEVE DEVEAU

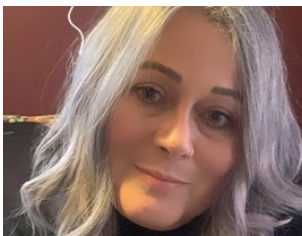
Recipient of Let's Keep Talking Outstanding Individual Award (2021)

"Hello. I'm Steve, 'ex-offender', and core group member. I woke up today sober and not in prison, the physical or the mental one, it's a good day."

That's how Steve Deveau introduces himself at each 7th Step Society meeting. It's just one of many commitments he's made to ensure his life continues in a positive direction.

"My life's journey has been a tremendous teacher," confides Steve. "I understand the struggles embedded in mental health, addiction, relapse, and recovery. I lived with the turmoil of displaced anger. My promise is to help those that are interested in learning about the journey to recovery, as I once believed it was not possible and today, I am one of the few who have found it."

Most recently, Steve has also been working with the 7th Step Society Peer Research Team as co-researcher on reintegration needs following incarceration. He has co-authored a chapter for a book on stigma associated with substance use disorders soon to be published by Cambridge University Press. Steve also works as a case manager for 7th Step Canada's Pardon Me 7th Step.



NANCY EVERSON-BERRIGAN

The first female to be employed by 7th Step NS as a Peer Support Worker, Nancy Everson-Berrigan is also a Provincial Peer Support/Program Coordinator, Pardon Me 7th Step Administrator, National Program/Volunteer Coordinator, and Guest Editor of this Special Issue of the *Justice Report*. See Everson-Berrigan's lead article—Face of the "Offender"—in this SI.



DOMINIC THOMAS

My name is Dominic Thomas, a Peer Support Worker for the 7th Step Society of Nova Scotia. Born and raised in Dartmouth, I had been in active addiction for 30 years and was incarcerated for the better part of 13 years before finally deciding to pick myself up and get the help I needed. I went to the Freedom Foundation of Nova Scotia, a non-profit addiction treatment facility, and was introduced to the 7th Step Society of NS. The support from the staff and people from all walks of life is beneficial. 7th Step Society is the perfect fit for me! As time went on, I learned that these people really want to know my story and about my ups and downs. During my addiction no prosecutor ever wanted to know why I was doing crime, why I had over three hundred charges and one hundred convictions – all they wanted was their pound of flesh. So, for up-and-comers and current prosecutors, judges, parole officers, etc. to hear my story and stories of others is very important. After being in recovery for a year, I wanted to give back.



BRANNON HOOPER

Brannon Hooper brings a unique experience to his work as a paid employee (Peer Support Worker - PSW) of 7th Step Society of Nova Scotia. He is pictured standing in front of a painting he created. Growing up in group homes throughout Halifax Regional Municipality (HRM), Brannon found himself in conflict with the law. Having lived experience from his struggles with trauma, mental health, and addictions, he now brings positive change to the community. Brannon joined the 7th Step Society of Nova Scotia in January 2022, becoming a core group member and dedicating his time to our street group meetings. He shortly after completed our Peer Support Training and has co-facilitated our training program. Brannon's continued resilience brought him to his current positions as Peer Support Worker with 7th Step Society of Nova Scotia and Case Manager for the Pardon Me Project with 7th Step Society of Canada.

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OCTOBER 6-9 OCTOBRE 2024

CCJA 39TH BIENNIAL CONGRESS / 39E CONGRÈS

CANADIAN CRIMINAL JUSTICE ASSOCIATION / ASSOCIATION CANADIENNE DE JUSTICE PÉNALE

Theme/Thème * Pursuing Reconciliation in the Canadian Criminal Justice System / Chercher la Réconciliation dans le Système de Justice Pénale Canadien

Place/Endroit * Banff, Alberta

Info/Infos * <https://www.ccja-acjp.ca/pub/en/news/congress-2024-call-for-papers/>

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Victoria, BC**

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Drumheller, AB**

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Bowden, AB**

**Burnside Provincial Institution
Halifax, NS**

**Nova Federal Women's Institution
Halifax, NS**

**Sleepy Hollow Provincial Institution
Charlottetown, PEI**

**HMP FEDERAL/PROVINCIAL INSTITUTION
ST. JOHN'S, NL**

**WHITBOURNE YOUTH CENTRE
WHITBOURNE, NL**

**BISHOP'S FALLS FEDERAL INSTITUTION
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ABBOTSFORD, B.C.**

**MILLHAVEN INSTITUTION
KINGSTON, ON**

7th Step Society of Canada

<https://7thstep.ca/>

Nova Scotia/Incorporated, Halifax (Charitable status)
www.7thstepns.com

British Columbia/Unincorporated

Alberta/Incorporated (Calgary)
ab7s.ca

**Prince Edward Island/Incorporated
(Charlottetown)**

Newfoundland/Incorporated (St. John's)

Ontario/Unincorporated

Saskatchewan/Unincorporated (Saskatoon)

New Brunswick/Unincorporated (Miramichi)

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